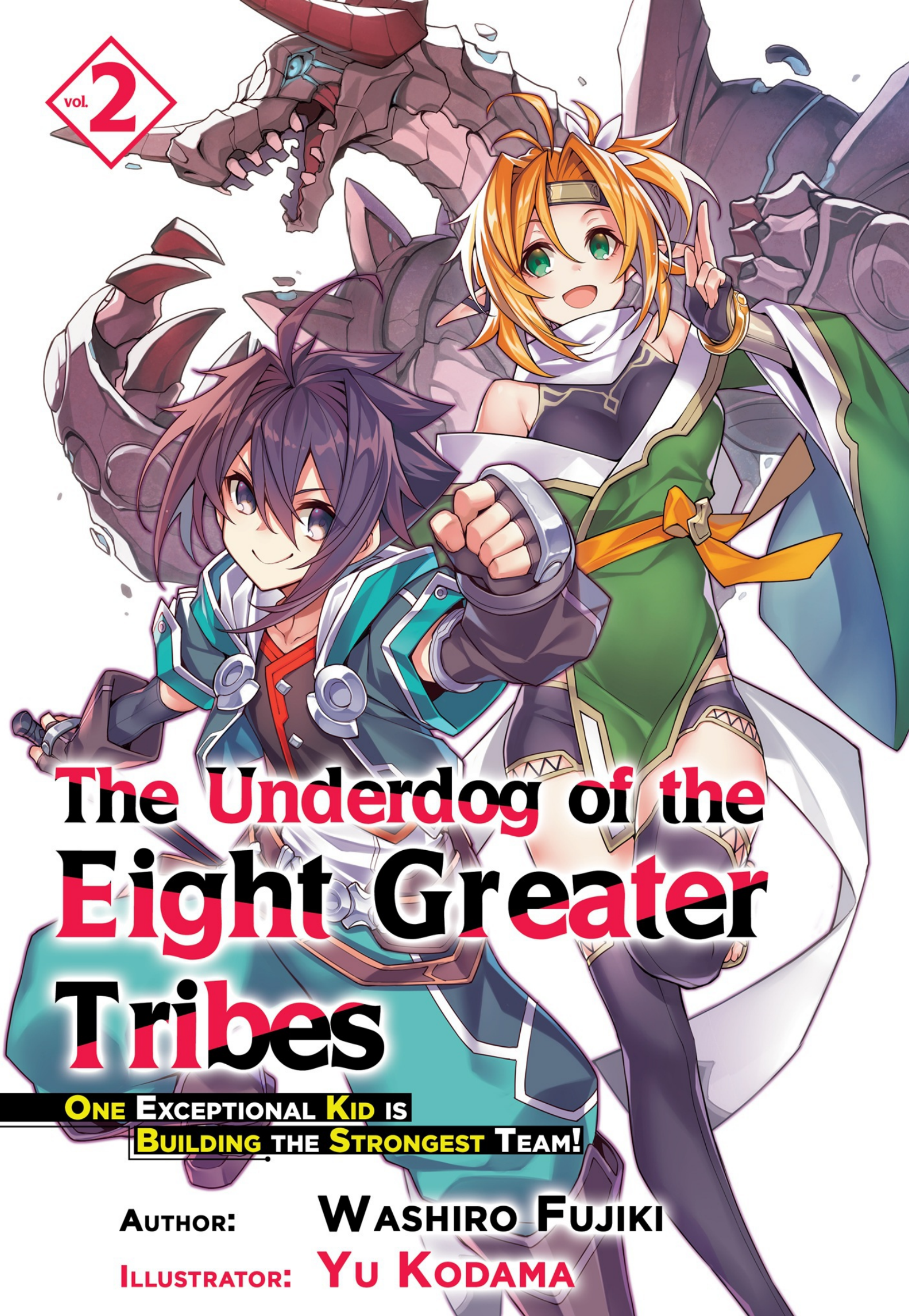


vol. **2**



The Underdog of the Eight Greater Tribes

ONE EXCEPTIONAL **KID** IS
BUILDING THE **STRONGEST** TEAM!

AUTHOR:

WASHIRO FUJIKI

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VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM



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“Really!
Really,
thank you,
thank you!”

Eleanor

An elven girl who got separated from her teammates. She holds a strong admiration for the warriors known as ninja. While her speech may be a bit odd, she is a Gold Rank.

Yuri Eniastar

A boy from the Human Tribe aiming to be the strongest duelist.

While usually rather mild, he will do anything to win a duel. Currently busy gathering team members to participate in the Babel Roulette.

Overcome with emotion, Eleanor embraced Yuri again and patted his head all over. The thinness of her clothing made this somewhat unsettling.



“I’ll do any
job for money—
that’s just how
I do business.”

Her turquoise eyes were touched by crimson;
nine silver tails unfurled from her back like
the petals of a lotus flower. Leaving it all to her wrath,
Athena swung her great sword in white, searing flames.

“Release!!”

Haring

A Dragon Tribe man characterized
by his incredibly robust body.
While having reached the
respectable rank of Silver, his
reputation in Babel isn't the best.

Currently hired to guide Yuri
through the dungeon.

Athena
Crossford

A fox-girl and member of the Beast
Tribe who excels in physical combat.
A Silver Rank Duelist, her moniker
is the "Flame Deva."
Currently being somewhat
overprotective as Yuri's "Big Sis."



**“Divine
Might—
Might of
the Sacred
Tree Meliades.”**

Throwing the two of them onto his back, Haring slid down the steep slope, scraping away rock on the way down. He needed to create as much distance from that man as possible. Bounding off and correcting his posture mid-air, he lifted his head to get one last look at the one on the cliffs. Just one look at the man readying his spears had him instinctively taking the next leap.

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Prologue

Nowadays, the duel city is seething with heated enthusiasm. Not only has the Babel Roulette kicked off its decennial run, but the battle at the opening ceremony lit a flame in the hearts of many.

With no significant abilities to speak of, mix-blood humans were once considered the absolute weakest. However, the mix-blood boy Yuri Eniastar managed to surpass the shackles of his lineage. He was pitted against Beheading Elias Crossford, a man recognized by all for putting up a good fight against an administrator in the previous Roulette. But Yuri did not shy away; in fact, he managed to seize victory.

Seeing such a battle, we duelists were cast into a pit of memory to reflect on an ideal we all once held dear: to “Aim for the top.”

It didn’t matter who the opponent was, for battle would prove we were the strongest. Yes, that duel breathed new life into the wish, the prayer that lay at our foundation.

This new Roulette will surely be a fierce one. But only such a fierce battle can be called fitting of duelists like ourselves—

“Ooh, he just keeps going on about Yuri.”

As she gazed at the city bulletin board, Athena’s ears twitched curiously back and forth. Meanwhile Yuri, the boy at the heart of the storm, was occupying a lobby bench of Babel Tower, looking despondent.

“Right... I don’t really know what to say to that.”

Fram lightly patted his discouraged shoulders in an attempt to cheer him up. “You don’t have to say anything. A duelist’s reputation directly ties into their income, so being the talk of the town is a good thing.”

It had been a week since his duel with Elias, and the talk surrounding him showed no signs of dying down. A wonderful thing for a duelist, to be sure. He felt sincerely grateful that so many people were paying attention to him.

However—

“Rather than that! I just want to duel!” he loudly declared as he shot to his feet.

His body—sent into a berserk state from the duel—was back to normal, and after adjusting his condition with training, Yuri was positive he was back up to speed. In fact, he already knew he was fit to fight three days ago.

He wanted to fight more, to test out his new strength. And yet, lately, the desire to duel had become the least of his worries.

“Every time I go out, I get surrounded by journalists and reporters. When I went to Mr. Elias’s shop, they kept congratulating me instead of offering me work. And the tourists keep asking for handshakes...”

“As expected of the man of the hour.”

“You sure are popular, Yuri!”

“No, I’m definitely thankful they feel that way! But if this is what’s preventing me from dueling, then I really need to get my priorities straight! I’m just itching to fight!”

“Right, come to think of it, when you closed in on that last reporter with your ‘Let’s have a fight, yes, let’s fight this instant!’ spiel, they pulled back and ran...”

“It’s because the look in his eyes changes when dueling is involved.”

Yuri’s body twitched restlessly as the two women exchanged a tired look. His unusual hotbloodedness was, of course, thanks to the Babel Roulette: a battle where a great many duelists would join hands. This was a battle to determine the strongest. He couldn’t possibly settle down with it towering right before his eyes.

“I’m sure I’ve already told you, but we’re still in the Roulette’s entry period. It’s the time to gather members and draft plans. If you start fighting now, your stamina won’t hold out to the end.”

“Don’t worry about that! I’m confident in my stamina!”

“Your Big Sis has plenty to spare!”

“...So I’m the only one who’ll be run ragged.” However, despite her grandiose sigh, Fram did offer a small nod. “Well, I’m not on Yuri’s level, but I do want to hurry and find a team so we can develop some coordination.”

“If I’m remembering right, team battles are possible during the entry period too, right?” Yuri asked.

“Nah, it’s more like all duels are now team battles? You can enter your team’s battles whenever you want, it’s a free-for-all! If you see your teammate fighting someone, swoosh right in there!”

Athena’s tail wagged, a sign of her motivation, but Yuri’s head tilted in confusion.

“In that case, what happens to people who aren’t part of a team?”

“Nothing changes if it’s one-on-one,” Fram replied, “but if your opponent is on a team, it’s possible some of their people might join in. You will be fighting at a clear disadvantage.”

“...You mean it gets really hard if you’re on your own?”

“Correct,” she continued. “But your rate is locked during the entry period. For now, there’s nothing lost in trying it out, or rather, performing well against multiple people is a good way to sell yourself. You might attract the attention of a team that wants to scout you, and you’ll probably get more fans and backers.”

He thought that those who weren’t on a team wouldn’t be able to enjoy dueling during the entry period, but it seemed there was another way of looking at it. “When you put it like that...staying alone does sound interesting!” he promptly concluded.

“Oh dear, Athena. It seems our team is on the verge of collapse.”

“When I’m already psyched up to fight with Yuri!?”

“No, no, I’m not going to break us up before we’re even formed! I want to fight alongside the two of you too, and I do think we can have some fun battles together!!”

Yuri thrust out his fist, and Athena and Fram smiled and touched their own fists to his.

“To everyone here to enter the Babel Roulette, thank you for waiting. Those who have filled out their forms, please proceed to a receptionist window.”

A female announcer’s voice resounded through the tower’s hall. In no time at all, Yuri was triumphantly on his way.

“Well then, let’s get our names in!”

“Aight, do us proud, Leader!”

“I’m counting on you, Leader.”

With the girls seeing him off, Yuri proceeded to the receptionist window. It was there that he found himself face to face with a familiar red-headed woman as he passed his application over the desk.

“Ms. Mirka! I brought our team’s application!!”

“Yes, yes. I’ve been waiting for this.”

Mirka took the papers with a sluggish tone. After scanning to see that there were no blank fields, she returned a hefty nod.

“Alright, you’re good to go. As detailed on the form, I must now confer authority onto you as team leader. Please hold out your Proof.”

Yuri followed right along, brandishing the bracelet wrapped around his left arm. A Proof now set with the glimmer of green, a glimmer earned upon surpassing his limits in the fight the other day.

After taking a good look at the Proof, Mirka tapped at a gemstone on the desk. “Very good. Yuri, you can now use your Proof to send out membership requests. Once someone accepts, they will be officially added to your team.”

“Err... Alright, I think I got it!”

Imitating Mirka’s slick movements, he fiddled with his Proof until he reached a screen where he could send out applications. As he was doing this, Mirka glanced back at his form and burst into a soft smile.

“Even so...that’s quite a brave team name you’re going with.”

“Hm? Is there something wrong with it?”

“Oh no. A majority of teams mix up the first letters of their names, or use their homelands or words that resonate with them. I just thought this was a bit rare.”

“But it does resonate with us! It’s our goal, after all!”

Back when they were trying to decide the team name with a duel, Fram eventually explained the meaning behind her proposal.

A household that carried the blood of all eight races, pushing forward towards a single goal... Yuri himself had strongly inherited their desire.

The simple goal: being crowned the strongest.

“We’re here to not only enjoy our fights...but to also grow stronger than anyone. To not retreat no matter who we’re up against, to keep fighting with our eyes on victory.”

And with that proclamation, Yuri held his Proof proud and high.

“That’s the goal of our...Eniastar Team!”

Chapter 1

And with that, the Eniastar Team was formed. A team barreling full throttle towards the goal of becoming the strongest. The three of them had taken the first step, and— “They’re not coming... are they,” muttered a certain boy.

“Yeah... It’s been a week already...” groaned a fox.

“...Right.” a spirit dispiritedly sighed.

The team was already faced with a crisis.

“Ah... Even after I begged Eli to let me hand out fliers...”

“I thought we’d get at least one person after all those posts I put on the bulletin...”

On the terrace of Café Argent, Athena and Fram exchanged a deep sigh.

The upper limit on a team was eight members. There was no lower limit, so even if a team had only a single person registered, they were allowed to take part in the Roulette.

Unfortunately, as one might expect, this was not very realistic.

There was a limit to what someone could accomplish on their own, and greater numbers increased the breadth of tactics that could be employed. No matter how strong an individual was, it was difficult to take on multiple attackers, and these would be no ordinary attackers either. The Babel Roulette was where the mighty joined hands, so gathering the appropriate personnel could be called an absolute necessity.

However, in the week since they began, not a single hopeful applicant showed up.

“This is a bother... Given Yuri’s popularity, I thought we’d have our pick of candidates.”

Yuri defeated Elias despite his rare lineage as a mix-blood. He was a shining rookie bathing in attention. With such hopes placed on him, surely an

interested duelist would at least want to hear what he had to say... But as of yet, even that was a pipe dream.

Additionally, this wealth of attention had turned into a large shackle of its own.

"I tried asking some of our regulars, but they all got cold feet..."

"There's not much we can do about that. Having hopes placed on us means we're expected to perform considerably well. It won't be possible for anyone who isn't confident in their ability."

From the reactions they had seen over the past week, there was actually an exceedingly high number of interested duelists, but...the threshold was seen as too high for anyone to actually try and join.

"Too much for my shoulders."

"If I'm unable to do anything, I'm not sure what people will say about me."

"With all that attention, defeat will leave a much larger impact on my life as a duelist."

These were generally the opinions posted on the city bulletin. Gazing at these depressing reactions, Yuri pressed his face to the table, his lips pursed in a pout.

"Mhm...why don't they just try it out before they read too deeply..." he said.

"I know, right... With all the races together, sure, there are a few who don't think they'll fit the team affinity-wise, but there are lotsa things you don't know until you're actually fighting together."

"Not everyone can be as thoughtless as you two. It's nothing to complain about." Fram tapped the two heads planted flat against the table. *"And it looks like there was another reason."*

"Hm? What sort of reason?" asked Athena.

"And I quote, 'Yuri's fighting style is so grotesque, it will be harsh on my sanity.'"

"So you mean I'm the problem!?"

"Ah... Right, it took a while for us to get used to it." The fox-girl's ears

drooped like dying saplings as she recalled the scenes from their training together.

The Tribe Skill of a mix-blood that Yuri had worked out—Tribal Armament—allowed him to exhibit tremendous power in exchange for massive damage to himself. That power was what gave him the edge to triumph over Elias, but many were rather shocked by the sight of him blowing off his own arms and ultimately ending up without a limb left to stand on.

It should also be noted that this fighting style was generally disliked. At the end of the day, duels were a form of entertainment. While duelists shared a general understanding that Yuri had fought to the best of his abilities, the viewers from around the world saw him as a “guy who throws down disgustingly,” performing acts that they “can’t really show to the kids.”

As the viewing count and general popularity of one’s duels affected income, then considering their future prospects, it was impossible to join the team without due concern.

When the three shared yet another terribly heavy sigh, something cast a shadow over their table.

“...If you’re going to be taking up seats, at least order something.”

Yuri slowly raised his face to the ice-cold voice. There was Elias lording over them, a fed-up look on his face.

“I can put up with you using this store as a meeting spot, but if you set up camp with our seats, I will treat you as customers.”

“Oh, then one coffee please!”

“I’ll have a meat sandwich!”

“The dessert of the day.”

“Meaning you’re going to be here for a while,” Elias puffed before listing out the order on his memo pad.

After taking a better look at him, Yuri noticed he wasn’t wearing his usual outfit.

“Mr. Elias, you’re wearing the waiter uniform today?”

“Yeah. My employee is running late on personal business, so I’m standing in.”

“Huh? But Eli, don’t you usually just wear your casual clothes?”

“I am the owner of this shop, so to distinguish my position, I purposely opt not to wear a uniform but—” Cutting himself off, Elias turned his face. From the depths of the terrace rose the shrill cheers of several women. “Lately, we’ve been getting more female customers, so I’ve begun dressing like this.”

“Why, Mr. Elias, your merchant spirit is surprisingly strong...”

“This shop’s proceeds are just as important as my duels. If the shop goes under, my comrades and I will be forced to find new work. And you three wouldn’t want to have to job hunt on top of searching for members, would you?”

“Before that, I question whether there’s anywhere that will hire me at all!”

“I’m confident I’d be fired within a day!!”

“I’m not going to go work for someone I don’t know at this point.”

“Let me correct myself. If I throw you out onto the streets, I would be doing a disservice to the world.”

With a miserable shake of his head, Elias returned to the hall. But it wasn’t long before he was back on the terrace.

“So what’s troubling you, anyway?”

“Oh? You just couldn’t leave us be, could you! I love you, Eli!”

“Thank you. Well, I already have a general grasp of what’s going on.” He picked up one of the fliers stacked beside Athena and nodded. “I see. There’s no way you’ll get anyone with these.”

“You’re always so quick to put me down! I hate you!”

“My sister’s emotions are far too unstable.”

“That’s just the usual. So what’s wrong with it?” Fram quickly asked, sensing that the conversation was about to derail.

“First off,” Elias indifferently replied as he swung the paper around, “you haven’t set any conditions for Rank or Tribe.”

“Eh? That’s no good?” Yuri cocked his head quizzically.

“It won’t say it’s bad. These would be the appropriate conditions if this were your first time and you just wanted to get a grasp on what the Babel Roulette is... The real problem is the next portion.”

He thwacked a finger against the next item on the list.

“The stated goal is to ‘Win the Babel Roulette’... This may come naturally to you people, but it completely contradicts the first point I brought up. At the very least, you won’t get anyone Chrome or below with that condition.”

“But...we’re not getting anyone above that either.”

“I should think not. They’re being put off by the lack of professionalism in the criteria,” Elias said as he circled the criteria entry with the pen he took their order with.

“To win the Babel Roulette, tactics and strategy are more important than pure strength. That’s why you need to select races that match your strategy.”

“...Err, what do you mean?” asked Yuri.

“In a nutshell, you need the right person in the right place. The eight tribes all have their own characteristics, and naturally they have their strong and weak points. Saying anyone will do essentially means you have yet to decide on your strategy. You’ll make the high rankers lose confidence in your prospects of victory.”

He wrote the word “strategy” on the flier, and then went on to write “role.”

“First off, you should choose what roles you will fill in battle. Then decide whether you need to strengthen your strong points, or cover for your weak points. Narrowing down your subject pool will actually be a blessing to your applicants.”

“...Yeah, I see?” Try as he might to understand, Yuri found himself feeling somewhat unsatisfied.

“I get what you want to say,” said Elias with a wry smile. “What I’ve just said was based solely on the principle of ‘aiming to win.’ It was an opinion completely ignoring the thought process of ‘enjoying our fights.’ Ultimately, you

need to find a balance you can accept... That's how we won our way through the Roulette."

If victory had been their only objective, Elias would have asked Reilly, Yuri's master, to retire and replaced her with a stronger combatant. Despite this, they still managed to remain to the end. While Reilly was a mix-blood, she managed to contribute to the team in areas outside of pure combat.

"There's really no telling how high each decision will raise your chances of victory. Your best bet is to form a team you know you won't regret."

"I see! That definitely does sound like a good idea!" Yuri jubilantly smiled, and Elias calmly nodded back.

"But I meant it when I said you should decide your roles in the team. If you decide on what tribes you need, I can talk to some people. Don't forget there's always new things to discover in the midst of battle—"

Just as it seemed he was going to start droning on again, a hand snaked out from behind to lock his shoulder in a firm grasp. He turned smack-dab into the smile of a young demon man in the clothes of a cook.

"Boss...how many times do I have to call you... The food was done ages ago...!"

"Oh, it's just Frevo. My apologies, I'm occupied at the moment."

"Really, well, it looks like you're having a fun little chat, eh! Our tardy's still not in, so if you don't do your work right, I can't clock out on time!"

"But I need to teach the Eniastar Team what exactly the Babel—"

"Athena, missy, can I drag off this stupid brother of yours?"

"Aye sir!"

"Thanks, miss. Look, if you wanna talk that bad, then do your work first."

Frevo grabbed Elias by the collar and dragged him back into the shop. The way he was pulled away without any expression or motion made for a somewhat surreal sight.

Once Elias was gone, the party of three leaned in once again.

“Roles, eh... I’m not too good at thinking before moving,” Yuri glumly admitted.

Fram replied, “Roles are important, but we will have to find what we’re lacking as a team. If we’re hoping for around five people, for now, I’d say we need one extra backline and frontline.”

“There are tribal strengths and weaknesses to consider, right?” he asked.

“That’s right. I’m sure there are tribes you haven’t fought yet, Yuri, so let me give a simple explanation.” Picking up a flier, Fram listed out the eight tribes with fluid pen strokes. “The Beast Tribe, Dragon Tribe, and Dwarf Tribe are the ones most suited for the front line. They’re all tribes centered around close-quarters combat. Beastmen for offense, dragonkin for defense, and dwarves for burst damage. Generally speaking, of course.”

“Wait, the Human Tribe isn’t fit for the front line?”

“If I had to say, the Human Tribe are what I would classify as midliners. There are people like you who mainly fight hand-to-hand, and there are those who compose their skills around magic.”

“Ah, right, right. An angel’s Divine Might blessings can also be divided between physical and magic, so wouldn’t you say they’re midliners too?” Athena chimed in. The pen went round and round as she circled the Human and Angel Tribes.

“And the remaining three— demons, elves, and spirits— are suited for the backline. Spirits boast massive firepower, demons are good at stalling, and elves can snipe, launch surprise attacks, set traps, well, let’s just say they can pick up a wide breadth of positions.”

“I see... So right now, we have a frontliner, a midliner, and a backliner.”

“Correct. If I could pick and choose, I would prioritize getting a dragon or demon.” Fram wrapped those two names in a double circle. “You and Athena are both the all-out-offensive types, so if you have a dragon on the front lines with you, you won’t have to worry about defense. In my case, I might have the firepower, but I expend stamina quickly. I think I can fight better if we have a demon to stall and let me recharge.”

And after saying that, Fram hit her hands together to bring the discussion to a close.

“Alright. Anyone who knows a promising dragon or demon, please raise your hand.”

“Nope!”

“I already asked and they said no!”

“I hardly know anyone apart from you people.”

For the following while, the three looked at one another in complete silence.

“Hey, we’re back to the starting line!” Athena cried.

“No, no! We narrowed down what we need, so let’s just call that progress!”

“...Well, it’s a little progress. I’ll rewrite the recruitment ad on the city bulletin.”

“Then I’ll add the details on the fliers!”

As the two of them got to their own jobs, Yuri was about to step in to help when—

A familiar figure entered the edge of his line of sight. A large body towered a head over the people coming and going, characteristic curved horns sprouting from his head.

The moment he realized who it was, Yuri leapt to his feet.

The first duelist Yuri ever conversed with upon coming to the dueling city. The first opponent he faced.

“That’s right... I do know a promising dragon!” Yuri informed his two companions before dashing into the streets of the sightseeing district.



“—And that’s why I called out to you, Mr. Haring!”

Yuri explained the course of events with a beaming smile as he trailed Haring down the road. Haring, meanwhile, kept his irritation rather blatant.

“Not my problem. Get lost.”

“Oh, I can’t quite do that!”

“Yeah, well, you know what you *can* do? Learn to listen to what people are sayin’!”

Haring stamped his foot to the ground, earning a few looks from the surrounding pedestrians before they went back on their way.

“And wait, what could possibly make you think I’d say yes?”

“Well Mr. Haring, you look like you don’t have many friends, so I just thought you’d come along if I asked!”

“Okay, I get it now. Here comes the fist. Grit your teeth.”

“Oh, so you’re going to join if I beat you in a duel!?”

“Hell no! I just want to knock your friggin’ lights out!”

A vein popped up on Haring’s forehead as he watched Yuri enter a fighting stance. However, it only took a few deep breaths for him to contain his anger.

“Aight, listen here, kid. I don’t plan on entering the Babel Roulette.”

“Oh... I’m so sorry, you really didn’t have anyone to...”

“Lemme stop you right there. I’m just not interested.”

Haring painstakingly grunted. From what Yuri could see, he really was just simply uninterested.

“Fightin’ alongside someone else just ain’t my style, and I don’t give a hoot about bein’ strongest or comin’ out on top.”

“Then...why did you become a duelist, Mr. Haring?”

“I don’t got a reason. It just worked out that way.”

His expression looked genuine, and his words sounded completely sincere. However, Yuri couldn’t help but feel like something was off.

“Way I see it, anything’s fine, s’long as it brings in the dough. It’s not like joinin’ the Babel Roulette earns me anything. In fact, I’ll be earnin’ more money just doin’ other things.”

“By other things...you mean you’re going to do a normal job?”

“What else can it mean?”

“No, it’s just...I can’t imagine you actually working, Mr. Haring.”

“Are you not satisfied until you piss me off every time we meet...!?”

His body quivered in wrath once again, but after sensing that Yuri truly didn’t know, he ultimately sighed and continued.

“There are all sorts of jobs a duelist can do, you get me? Simple jobs give small rewards, and you get more money the more work required. Collectin’ materials in the purgatory district is an especially lucrative business.”

“The purgatory district... I haven’t been there yet.”

The purgatory district was a region to the west. Yuri regularly dropped by the residential district to eat and sleep, and the sightseeing district to visit Elias’s shop, but he had yet to so much as set foot in the northern artisanal or western purgatory districts.

“Well, you’d better get a good look while you still can. During the entry period, the other folks are all busy gatherin’ members and practicin’ coordination. It’s rare to see the place so deserted.”

“I see, meaning you’re aiming for when no one’s there to make a killing in the dungeon!”

“...So you can be perceptive when you wanna be.” Haring grimaced. He hadn’t meant to explain that part. “Anyway, you see how it is. I’m busy scourin’ the dungeon and I don’t plan on enterin’ the Roulette. Go bother someone else.”

“Eeeh...but if you don’t join us, Mr. Haring, we won’t be able to finish gathering members, so we won’t be able to join you in the dungeon...”

“Not my problem. In the first place, why are you even invitin’ me?” Unlike before, Haring seemed genuinely curious when he asked this. “You know how that stupid fox and shrimp spirit react to me. If I say I’m gonna join, they’ll definitely be against it. Worst case scenario, your team could fall apart.”

“Yeah...that’s because those two don’t know too much about you, Mr. Haring.”

“You don’t know jack about me either.”

“Oh no, oh no. I do know you’re a good person, Mr. Haring,” Yuri declared, his teeth glistening in a radiant smile. “I mean, you happily taught me the rules of the duel city when we first met, didn’t you!?”

“The hell...? That was just me shakin’ you down for loose change.”

“But it’s the most important thing to know here. It’s why I knew I had to fight Mr. Elias and prove I wasn’t wrong.”

No matter the details, it could be said that Haring was the first duelist to teach him the rules of the duel city. And that wasn’t all.

“You also refused to duel me.”

When Haring closed in on him, threatening a duel, Yuri readily accepted. But strangely, after seeing this reaction, Haring obstinately declined. While Athena stepped in right after, Haring had been trying to tell him something.

“I didn’t know until Ms. Mirka explained it to me, but in the duel city, ‘any fights outside of duels are heavily punished.’ If we fought then and there, I would have been kicked out of the city before even becoming a duelist.”

Indeed, the duel city imposed a heavy punishment for any fist thrown outside of the official dueling system. This rule was applied not only to duelists but to tourists and anyone taking a temporary stay, with the first one to raise a hand considered at fault and given the heavier sentence.

Of course, extenuating circumstances could be taken into account, but if Haring hadn’t stopped him, he would’ve at best had to pay a fine and at worst been forcefully deported back to the human continent.

“When I saw you were trying to tell me something, I got the feeling you weren’t a bad person... And when I heard about the rules, I was certain of it!”

In contrast to Yuri’s sprightly tone, Haring’s eyes widened, befuddled. Eventually, he nodded, a meek look on his face.

“...Nah, that was just me tryna run because it seemed like a pain.”

“Please don’t make it sound like I’m a pain to deal with!”

“A pain’s an understatement... Just look at how you’re hauntin’ me now.”

After scratching up his hair, Haring sighed for the umpteenth time.

“Also, I’m not lyin’ when I say I mistook you for some rich kid and tried to shake you down. Whatever the case, I’m not a good guy.”

“If you really were a bad person, you wouldn’t have stopped me there. The way I see it, a bad person would have been happy seeing me fall down on my luck, and at the very least, you’re not one of them.”

Regardless of the man’s obstinate denial, Yuri continued repeating the same words again and again with a smile on his face.

“That’s why, to me, you’re a good person, Haring.”

By this point, Haring had realized there was no winning this argument. He clicked his tongue and turned the other way.

“Tsk...see? You really are a pain.”

“You don’t have to keep saying it, you know!”

“Shut it. It’s true, goddammit.” He cursed, violently ruffling Yuri’s hair any which way. “Anyway, I’m not enterin’ the Roulette. If you wanna win, find someone decent.”

And with those parting words, Haring turned and left.

Yuri saw him off with a deep, weary sigh. “Mnnh... I thought Mr. Haring would accept the offer.”

Attitude-wise, he did shun Yuri, but despite all he said, he still stopped to chat. Those parts of him made it hard for Yuri to believe he was the villain everyone described him as. This all led Yuri to try inviting him, but...it seemed he wasn’t the right person to ask.

Yuri had run off earlier after making a bold declaration, so he reluctantly placed a hand on his Proof to report his failing to the other two when— “Hey, Yuri. What are you doing here?”

He heard a languid voice from the bustling crowd and reflexively turned. Mirka was standing there in her casual clothes, tilting her head.

“Err... You’re...Ms. Mirka?”

“Stop right there. Why did you phrase that as a question?”

“Err, you’re not wearing your uniform, so I thought I might have the wrong person...”

“Please don’t make it sound like my true essence is my uniform!”

Mirka grabbed Yuri by the collar, half in tears as she swung his head to and fro. They saw each other practically every day, and yet the impression left by her uniform was so strong he really did stop and wonder if she was someone else.

“I’ll admit, I rarely get to wear my own clothes, but that reaction is terrible...”

“I-I’m sorry...but you’ve been somewhat strange today. Your clothes as well, but don’t you usually wake up at the same time as us?”

The Demon Tribe was primarily nocturnal. This trait hardly seemed to bother Mirka who effectively followed the same biological rhythm as the Human Tribe and got up at the same time as Yuri.

However, this morning she was nowhere to be found, having left behind a note stating: “I’m off today, so I’m going for a bit of a morning walk.”

“We were waiting for you to return from your walk, up to the last second.”

“I’m sorry. I was dropping by an acquaintance’s.”

Yuri had a vague idea of why Mirka was dressed so casually. Her uniform did attract some attention, so if she wanted to meet a friend on an off day, perhaps this way was far more convenient.

“Even so...that’s quite a load you’re carrying there.”

“Ah, right, my acquaintance always says, ‘this stuff’s just in the way, can you take it off of me?’ and loads me up.” Brandishing the large sack under her arm, Mirka let out a tired sigh. “But, well, they’re materials from the depths of the dungeon, and I find something I like from time to time... It’s just, don’t you think they could at least go out and sell them on their own?”

“Hmm... So these are materials from the dungeon?”

With Mirka's permission, he tried fishing through the large sack. There was little he could say about the colorful ores and pelts, but there were a few medicinal herbs so rare he had only ever seen them in a picture book. Just the herbs alone would fetch a considerable price; he couldn't even begin to estimate how much the contents of the entire sack were worth.

"Still, we were in quite a pickle there. This month, you came to the city, and the opening of the Roulette's kept me so busy at work, I nearly missed my chance to drop by."

"You have been pretty busy lately. In that case, couldn't you just explain the situation and have them come and see you?"

"No way, no how. That person's not just eager to fight, they're a battle-crazed lunatic. Not to mention, if I don't go see them, I feel like the city-mandated duel quota will just slip by before I know it."

"Battle-crazed lunatic... Why, I'd love to meet them!!"

"Yeah, I think you'd get along..."

As Mirka smiled bitterly, Yuri suddenly realized something and immediately asked, "But if you just wanted to remind them about the quota, couldn't you just place a call through your Proof? Why do you have to meet face-to-face?"

"Why? Well I mean, we can't duel if we don't meet, right?"

She dismissively waved her hand, saying it as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. But Yuri was petrified, his eyes open wide.

"Err... Duel? Who's dueling who?"

"Well, me and my friend."

"Ms. Mirka...have you stayed in the duel city so long you've convinced yourself you're a duelist..."

"Oh come on, what's with that pitying look on your face?" Mirka's black wings flapped out in discontentment. "I'm a duelist too, so of course, I have to get my duels in," she said, flashing her sharp, pointed fangs.



Leading Mirka along, Yuri returned to Café Argent.

“—And so it turns out, Mirka is actually a duelist!!”

Athena and Fram were waiting for him, and he quickly informed them of this shocking fact, however— “...Mirka, I think lying is bad.”

“No matter how gullible Yuri is, you shouldn’t just lie to him like that.”

He received exactly the reactions he expected, which caused Mirka to throw herself over the table.

“Urgh... Why won’t either of you believe me...”

“I mean, I’ve never seen you duel before,” Athena plainly stated.

Fram pointed to her own left arm and said, “In the first place, you never even wear a Proof.”

On any outing, a duelist was required to wear their Proof on their left hand. Yuri had lived with her for a month, the others even longer than that, and none of them had ever seen her wearing a Proof.

Mirka glumly lifted her head ever so slightly. “If it’s my Proof you’re looking for, I always have it on, don’t I?” She off-handedly gestured toward the gem hanging on her neck.

“...Err, that’s a staff badge, isn’t it?” asked Yuri.

“Yes, yes. Its main purpose is to access the terminals in Babel Tower, but there’s nothing preventing me from using it to duel, you know.”

“Then what happens to your rate when you duel?”

“Back when I first got the staff-member Proof, I synced it to my duelist one, so it properly gets recorded under my name. Well, I see no real reason to carry two of them around, but people don’t often try to duel the receptionists, so I can understand why a majority don’t know.”

After she finished her explanation, Mirka took a calculated look back at Yuri, Athena, and Fram.

“So, do you believe I’m a duelist yet?”

“...Sorry,” they replied in chorus.

“Good, of course I’ll forgive such an honest apology.” Finally back in high spirits, Mirka drank a mouthful of coffee. “On another note, how goes the member search?”

“It’s been a stormy voyage, to be perfectly honest,” Yuri replied.

“As I thought. I saw you with Haring a minute ago, but by the look of things, he turned you down.”

The moment Mirka mouthed the name, both Athena and Fram’s faces warped into frowns.

“...Yuri, your dragon friend was Haring?”

“Hmm? I mean, we dueled, so that makes us friends.”

“He definitely is from the Dragon Tribe, and in light of our current situation, he’s not a terrible choice, but...”

“Of course he’s a bad choice! I mean, it’s Haring we’re talking about!” Athena screamed, her voice clearly frenzied as she loudly rose to her feet. Her expression was, for once, filled with blatant disgust, the hair on her ears and tail standing on end.

“C-Calm down, Athena!”

“No way! I can’t fight alongside people who do bad things!”

“I get where you’re coming from, Yuri, but I have to side with Athena on this one.”

Fram offered a small nod in her favor. However, Yuri couldn’t accept this.

“...I don’t think Mr. Haring is a bad person.”

“Likely because you haven’t been in the duel city for long. I’ve never fought him personally, but the fact stands that the rumors around him are never good.” Smoothing over her expression, Fram went into the rumors surrounding the Dragon Tribe man. “In his duels, he specifically targets newbies to take their money; he steals other peoples’ prey in the dungeon; he blackmails outside merchants into unfair trades... Even ignoring these rumors, his standard violent behavior stands out, so if you stick around him, you could get dragged into all manner of unnecessary trouble.”

“But those are just rumors, aren’t they? It’s not like—”

“They’re not rumors, I’ve seen it firsthand,” Athena interrupted. She was in a sharp, seething rage, just like when he first met her on the docks. She refused to say a word after that, so Mirka picked up where Athena left off.

“It happened shortly before you got here, Yuri. He was the suspect of a certain incident.”

“...An incident?”

“Remember how I told you about newcomers being tricked into contractual duels?”

While the principle of “the loser must obey the winner” was a tacit understanding, a contractual duel was where it was made into an official contract. According to Mirka, it was now mandatory to explain at registration how this system could be misused for evil.

“It’s mainly abused for money, but lately, we’ve been running into other sorts of issues. Those who use malicious contracts to effectively treat new kids like slaves.”

“...But then wouldn’t they be fine as long as they could run away and report the matter to city hall?”

“And what if they couldn’t?” Mirka calmly narrowed her eyes. “I’ll kill you if you run away... That threat is about death in a duel, but even if it is artificial, experiencing death is enough to instill primordial fear. Then what would happen to someone who only just came to the duel city and wasn’t even accustomed to the pain from a duel?”

Once the duel was over, their injured body would be reverted as if nothing had happened at all. But during the duel, the pain and anguish would be real. At its extreme, the sensation of death could carve an instinctual fear into the bearer.

“From what I heard from a victim, a contract stating, ‘Duels can only and will always be initiated by someone of higher ranking,’ was imposed on the newcomers. Yuri, what do you think about those terms?”

“...It’s to make sure the newcomers couldn’t duel each other?”

“Correct. As outsiders cannot intervene in any way during a duel, the newcomers might use this to escape their surveillance. And of course, they wouldn’t want that. A Proof will reject a contract that obstructs its primary functions, so they got around that by making it not so they couldn’t duel but that they needed permission.”

While her tone didn’t change, there was a sense of repugnance seeping into the air around Mirka.

“A situation that can’t be escaped so easily. If anyone tries, they’ll be forced into a duel and instilled with the pain and fear of death... The children we rescued were all so fearful, so broken down and weakened.”

Those newcomers were probably the same as Yuri. Charmed by the prospect of duels, they ventured out to the city of their dreams, their hearts racing at the fun days of battle that awaited them.

Yuri understood the feeling well; that was precisely why he clenched his fist tightly.

“The matter came to light when one of the victims finally made it to city hall... And at the time, the one with them was Haring—”

“You mean—”

“It means he was involved with the incident,” Athena frigidly explained. “They were there when I happened to drop by Babel Tower. I saw him trying to drag away a beaten, crying child by the arm.”

The flames of rage seethed in her turquoise eyes.

“I tried asking what was going on, but he started screaming and suddenly challenged me to a duel. I immediately reported it and Haring was taken in.” Athena practically spat out the man’s name. “But there was no evidence, so he got off with a slap on the wrist. The victim kid left the city without testifying.”

This wasn’t her usual radiant air. She gave off an ice-cold, murderous intent, similar to her brother Elias.

“That’s why I hate Haring. I hate that he can still be a duelist after everything

he's done."

Fram tapped her on the side of the head.

"Well, you see how it is. Just give up on getting him on the team."

Now that Fram had said that, Yuri lifted his hanging head. "—Then the problem will be resolved if I can just prove Mr. Haring is a good person!" he declared, his smiling face a bottomless pit of cheer.

As the other three were taken aback, he continued on.

"I haven't been here for long, and I don't know about Mr. Haring's past. But the Haring I know isn't the bad guy you say he is."

Anyone who heard that would think it was a completely baseless assumption. Still, Yuri said it with conviction.

"The first time I fought him was really fun. We clashed head-on, and I did my best thinking about what I could do to win. For the first time, I felt, 'oh, so this is a duel.'"

Finally, firsthand, he experienced the image of a duelist's battle he had drawn up as a child. Haring was the sort of opponent who could bring his dreams to life.

"I want an opportunity to fight him again and—if possible—I do want to fight alongside him. That's why I want to invite him."

Seeing him confidently force his way through the argument, Fram sighed lightly. "...You heard the leader. What are you going to do?" she asked Athena, who was folding her arms in thought.

For a while, Athena kept silent with a sour look on her face. Then she breathed a long, slow breath as if to release the tension in her shoulders.

"...Mn, fine, I get it," she answered, before raising a firm finger, "but you have to convince me he's a good guy! If you can't do that, your Big Sis won't allow it!"

"Alright! I'll definitely prove it!"

Athena regarded his enthusiasm with a troubled smile. But, for now, the

matter was settled.

Fram hit her hands together. “That being said, we can’t spend all our time on Haring. We have to find other members... And Yuri, there’s something else I need you to do.”

“Hmm? Me?”

“Yes, it’s about your Tribal Armament.”

A Tribe Skill only a mix-blood human could use. An ability born of sheer effort and madness.

“There’s no doubt your Tribal Armament is a powerful skill. Considering how you managed to defeat Elias with it, it could possibly become the trump card of our team. If you’re able to draw out the abilities of your other tribes too, you’ll greatly expand the tactics at our disposal.”

“Meaning, you want me to train to use other tribal traits too!”

“Precisely. But...before that, we’ll have to draft up some countermeasures for the recoil.”

Though she was the one who proposed it, Fram’s expression took a grim turn. Yuri needed to pay a heavy cost to use Tribal Armament. In exchange for drawing out extraordinary power, his Human Tribe body would suffer immense damage.

“To be blunt, Yuri, your Tribal Armament is unsuited for going up against multiple opponents. It isn’t often you’ll be fighting one-on-one in a team battle, and if you’re injured too badly, we may have to retire.”

“D-Don’t worry about that! No matter what happens to me, I’ll endure—”

“Nope! Your Big Sis won’t allow it!”

“Yes, you can endure it. I can’t.”

The two of them smacked him on the head, causing him to inadvertently shrink back. But Fram had a point. His duel with Elias was one-on-one, allowing him to give it his all without paying mind to anything else. Precisely because he knew he would win as long as he could defeat a single person, he was able to move beyond his limits.

This wouldn't be the case in a team battle. The battle wouldn't end by taking one person out. If that wasn't bad enough, his own injuries would place a large burden on the other members. All things considered, improving his Tribal Armament was probably the top priority. But...

"But what am I supposed to do?"

"No clue!"

"...There's no precedent. You're the first one to use it."

The three of them tilted their heads, groaning without any ideas on how to improve. Yuri never neglected to train his own body, and he had grasped the knack of moving without breaking himself. He knew how to divert impacts from his vitals. Even so, he couldn't use Tribal Armament without hurting himself.

"There is one thing that comes to mind," Mirka finally spoke up. "Please remember what happened after he fought Elias. Yuri couldn't control his strength for a while, right?"

"Erk... Really, I'm sorry for breaking everything..."

As a result of removing his limiter time and again, Yuri could no longer restrict himself in daily life either. When he tried to open the door, it snapped. When he tried to take a seat, the chair was pulverized. When he tripped and caught himself against the wall, he created a large hole in the same shape as his body. There were plenty more examples to list, and he didn't know how to apologize.

But Mirka shook her head. "The point that I must emphasize is not what you broke, but what you didn't."

"...What do you mean?"

"You see, dear Yuri. Your brain's limiter was off, but you never once broke yourself, did you?"

Yuri tried thinking back to the days in question. Sure enough, he didn't remember hurting himself. If he had removed his restrictions and was using power beyond his physical limit, it wouldn't have been strange for him to take damage from the backlash. But forget his usual broken bones, he didn't even come down with minor injuries.

“The price of Tribal Armament is so large it can put you right at death’s door. That’s why I think your body might be instinctively trying to adapt to it.”

“Err, meaning as long as I can adapt—”

“It might be possible for you to use it for less of a cost. However,” Mirka groaned, her arms crossed, “that will be difficult to accomplish in the duel city.”

“Mnn? You mean normal duels won’t be enough?”

“The way you’re putting it, it sounds like he could just keep fighting with Tribal Armament like he did against Elias.”

The girls looked at her quizzically, prompting Mirka to stick up a finger.

“I do think it would be possible with duels, but a brutal battle where Yuri would have to keep using Tribal Armament in succession will be a heavy burden on him. Not only that, it will be hard to hold a duel where he’ll have to keep surpassing his limits.”

His duel with Elias placed both sides in utter desperation. It was a battle on which both Yuri and Elias had staked emotions they would never concede, and even if he was told to experience it again, it would be difficult to reproduce.

“So, while simple repetition might prove effective...finding an opponent during entry season will be quite difficult. Additionally, battling in the Field dulls one’s awareness of actual death. I’m not sure he’ll adapt while knowing he’ll be just fine in the end. It would have to be a situation where he would be constantly reminded of his impending doom—”

Cutting herself off, Mirka rang the bell on the table to summon a waiter. Elias immediately glided out from the store.

“You’re still here— Oh, and Stein is with you?”

“Yes, yes, pleasure. I just wanted to ask your opinion on something.”

“Is this about the male uniform I had you make for Eniastar?”

“Oh no, I firmly believe a female uniform would suit him better, so I’m taking that project in a more interesting direction.”

“Hold up! I think you just brought up something I shouldn’t ignore!”

He had inadvertently interrupted because of her unsettling admission, but Mirka simply pressed forward without paying him any mind.

“Elias, you have to restock your shop’s ingredients in the dungeon, right?”

“To be more precise, we gather herbs for tea and medicinal cooking, and certain plants used in desserts. But the main event is the coffee. I have an exclusive contract for the land I’m cultivating the beans on, and I personally head out at regular intervals to check on their growth and make sure that—”

“Oh, this sounds like it will be a long story. Another time, okay?” She cut down the monologue with one fell swoop before giving Yuri a pat on the back. “Why not ask Yuri to do the restocking?”

“...You want me to leave it to Eniastar?”

“Yep. Exploring the dungeon always comes with its share of danger, and I thought he would feel the dangers of death there more than in a duel. Don’t you think it’s the perfect place for dear Yuri here to take the next step up?”

“I see... But the items he collects will be served to customers. He’ll need the knowledge to distinguish between different plants, and he might need to know how to remove toxins after harvest—”

“Ah, that’s something I know how to do!”

Seeing Yuri readily raise his hand, Elias firmly locked eyes with him.

“...How do you tell dandelion from false-dandelion?”

“The petals open differently, and dandelion only grows on high ground!”

“Tell me, what part of the licor radiata do you harvest, and how do you remove the poison?”

“Grate the plant bulb, boil, drain, dry then grind to a fine powder!”

“How do you preserve alphinam petals?”

“They require a lot of moisture, so after plucking, put them in your canteen, and keep it airtight!”

“Alright, off you go.”

After Elias gave Yuri’s shoulder a pat of approval, Athena energetically rose

up. "Aight! Then it's dungeon-crawling time!!"

"Athena and Aizberg, stay in the shop," Elias immediately replied.

"But why!?" she protested.

"I happened to catch what Stein said earlier. You're trying to give Eniastar combat experience outside of dueling. There is no point if you tag along."

"But if we don't keep an eye on him," noted Fram, "there's no telling what crazy thing Yuri will do next."

"She's right! She's right!"

Before he knew it, Athena and Fram had positioned themselves in a tight-knit formation to protect Yuri.

Elias held his head and sighed. "...Stein, you say something to them."

"Right you are. This time, Yuri should go alone."

Just when the girls were certain she would side with them, Mirka smiled and shook her head.

"Having you two follow along will lessen his sense of danger. This time, we have to corner Yuri into an extreme pinch. Can the two of you watch and let that happen?"

"I'll definitely save Yuri!"

"I...well, I might raise a hand if it gets too dangerous."

"Yes, there you go. You're staying home." Grabbing the two of them by the scruff of the neck, she smoothly ripped them away from the boy. "And, that being the case, starting tomorrow, Yuri is going to spend a week holed up in the purgatory district."

"A week... Then I'll need supplies and equipment, won't I?"

Once again, Mirka dismissively waved him off as he was about to stand. "Oh no, oh no, why Yuri, you don't need anything at all."

"But I'll need the proper tools to harvest herbs, won't I?"

"I'll arrange a guide for you who will carry them. As I told you a moment ago,

Yuri, we need you to fall into a life-or-death predicament.”

Mirka’s canines gleamed as she lifted the ends of her lips.

“You’re going to survive the dungeon—completely empty-handed.”

She smiled assuredly, as if she was expecting great things from him.

Chapter 2

Yuri set foot into the purgatory district early the next day.

“Wow...!” he unwittingly exclaimed as he took in the scene touched by the morning light.

A massive, pyramidal tomb. A dome of pale-blue ice. A sea of flames where hellfire roared. An ancient castle of brick. A mountain coated in overflowing greenery. A cave so dark even the light of the sun seemed to avoid it. A waterfall pouring down from on high. A solemn temple towering over a lake.

It was as if famous sites from all over the world had been gathered here. It was far more than he had expected and overpowering to the eye.

“Err... So these are all entrances to different dungeons, and you should choose the right one for the materials you want.” He read out the memo he had received from Mirka the day before as he started looking for the dungeon he wanted.

“I don’t even know what to say. Next time, I’d love to come here with those two.”

In the end, Athena and Fram had reluctantly stayed home. He tried to have them at least accompany him here, but Mirka obstinately protested, going so far as to tie them up to stop them from following. Usually she was the one having to be restrained, but this time it was the complete opposite.

Regardless, Yuri hadn’t come to the purgatory district to play. His sights were set high, and if he wanted to reach them, he would have to do what he could.

“Alright! Just one week, I can do this!”

The moment he energetically thrust out his fist, something suddenly jolted him from behind. “Wah... That isn’t good...”

The note in his hand was swept off by a light breeze. He was about to hurry after it, but—

“Oi, brat.”

A familiar voice caused him to turn around.

“Ah, if it isn’t Mr. Haring!”

“Tsk... It really is you.”

In contrast to Yuri’s beaming smile, Haring’s face curled into an irked grimace. Yuri paid this no mind and simply continued to uphold his part of the conversation.

“What an outstanding coincidence to meet in a place like this!”

“It ain’t no coincidence. I’m here to—”

“I’m diving into the dungeon for the first time in my life! I’m so excited I don’t know what to do with myself!”

“...Oh, that’s right. You’re the kinda guy who doesn’t listen when people are talkin’.” After roughly scratching his head, Haring turned his back and started walking. “Whatever. Let’s get goin’, brat.”

“Hmm? I was told to wait for a guide...” According to Mirka, she had hired a personal guide for him. An accomplished individual who regularly made the trek through the dungeon for materials, who would complete any request for the right price, but...

“...Err, don’t tell me...”

“Tsk... That’s why you need to listen, goddammit.” Haring vexedly folded his arms, staring down at Yuri. “I’m your hired guide. I’m gonna be showin’ you around the dungeon for the next week.”

“Really!? What a wonderf—oof!?”

The moment Yuri was about to lock him in an embrace, Haring assailed him with a front kick. “Don’t you go misunderstandin’. I’m just taggin’ along for the money.”

“T-That doesn’t mean you have to kick me...”

“Shut it. Time’s a-wastin’.”

Leaving Yuri right where he was, Haring marched on in a huff. Yuri had to

break into a jog to catch up.

“So kid, how much do you know about the dungeon?”

“Barely anything more than the introductory explanation!”

“Are you daft? At least do your research.”

“Well, you see, me going to the dungeon was just suddenly decided yesterday, so...”

“Hah... Meaning my pay included an explanation fee.” Perhaps coming to terms with something, Haring lightly waved around his left arm. “Start by changin’ your Proof to dungeon mode.”

“Err, I can’t enter unless I change it?”

“That’s right. The dungeons here use the same transfer technology as the Field to blast you off to danger zones all over the eight continents. Try enterin’ it in your normal state, and your Proof’s dimensional transfer functions will get in the way.”

“You mean we will be temporarily leaving the duel city?”

“Only strictly speakin’; they’re still technically city property. There’s a barrier with a three-kilometer radius set up at the destination point, and we can’t go beyond it. It works both ways; the people who live there can’t go in either, but no decent folk go waltzin’ into danger zones where monsters prowl.”

After watching Haring operate his Proof to change the setting, Yuri imitated his motions.

“Also, the transfer point’s no different from reality, so you’d better watch out. Sure, you can duel there if you want to, but if you see another duelist, you’re better off gettin’ the hell away, or making sure they absolutely know you’re there. Otherwise, you’ll get mistaken as a beast, or caught up in some attack.”

“No different from reality... Oh, that’s why you can collect materials!”

“Oh, how perceptive.” The corners of Haring’s lips lifted ever so slightly.

The Field a Proof transported one to was merely an imitation of reality. Existing in a separate dimension, it carried not the slightest influence on the

real world, and everything was set back to its initial state once the Field was dispelled.

Even if one tried collecting materials inside the Field, once one left, they would all be gone. That was probably why the dungeon sent them off to real places. He was beginning to understand why Mirka said he would be constantly brushing up against danger.

“I think I should ask just in case, but you keep the injuries from the dungeon, right?”

“Course you do. Bein’ real in there means your wounds don’t heal, and it’s all over when you croak.”

Precisely because duels occurred in the Field, wounds and death were undone the moment it was over. But the dungeon had none of that. It was possible to be immobilized from a wound, and fatal injuries would bring about death.

“But hey, it’s that danger that keeps the earnings up. We duelists can do just fine against monsters, and we can harvest materials that would be difficult for those folks on the continent to reach.”

“Come to think of it...when I was buying herbs and consumables, I was surprised to see they were so much cheaper here than on the human continent!”

“Now you’re gettin’ it. They’re valuable to those folks on the continent who aren’t able to fight, but we can get them here like it’s nothin’. On the other hand, we can’t get clothes and daily necessities out here, so the city’s got a whole back-and-forth thing goin’.”

As he listened to Haring’s explanation, Yuri couldn’t help but stare at his face.

“...What?”

“Oh no...it’s just, Mr. Haring, you’re sounding surprisingly clever.”

“That’s just ’cuz you’re surrounded by idiots. I don’t even have to say anythin’ about that stupid fox, and that shrimp ice spirit might have a good head on her shoulders, but that’s only in duelin’.”

“Ahaha... Athena can be like that sometimes, and I can imagine Fram would

say thinking is a pain.” After a dry laugh, Yuri remembered his original question. “Don’t mind me. I just thought it was unexpected.”

“Tsk... Well, sorry for looking so stupid.”

“That’s not what I meant; you’re kinda good at teaching, or rather, I just thought you were giving some reliable explanations. Do you have any experience with teaching?”

To Yuri, it was a simple question. But, all of a sudden, Haring was scowling.

“...I’ve never taught a thing in my life,” he answered, before hesitantly adding, “It’s just, once upon a time, there was an idiot like you who asked all sorts of stupid questions.”

With his back turned, it was impossible to make out Haring’s expression, but his words carried a lingering hint of sadness. “But that don’t matter now. More importantly—this is the dungeon you’re goin’ into.”

After coming to a stop, Haring turned his eyes ahead. Before him was a stone gate, overgrown with vast swathes of vegetation. The gate itself was merely a manmade structure, yet it carried a peculiar air to it.

“The Ancient Forests of Bestia... A dungeon centered around the old, untouched woodlands across the continents. Compared to the others, it’s got a wider variety and quantity of monsters.”

As Yuri fell into a daze as he stared at the gate, dumbfounded, Haring smirked.

“How ’bout it, brat. Now’s your last chance to run home.”

Yuri’s eyes blazed at these provocative words.

“If I survive this, it’s possible for me to grow even stronger.” His fighting spirit burned bright in the maddened windows to his soul. “And for that—I’ll do anything.”

As if to answer Yuri’s declaration, the dungeon gate softly swung open.



After a few hours in a maze of dense jungle in the Ancient Forests of Bestia,

the pair was making excellent progress.

“Hm... I’m doing better than I expected,” Yuri said as he flung the monster blood from his black sword with a forceful swing.



Their current location was the tenth floor, which they had managed to reach without much incident.

“Even so...when we’re proceeding downwards, it’s strange for there to be a sun overhead.”

They were undoubtedly descending through the dungeon. However, a blindingly bright ball loomed overhead, releasing an insufferable heat as it illuminated the space.

According to Haring, the dungeon’s “floors” each connected to a certain region on the continents and, technically speaking, were outside of the duel city. As they were danger zones, those on the continent were forbidden from entering. It was only through duelists hunting the dangerous beasts that the people of the continents were protected from threat.

“Mr. Haring, are the materials from that monster valuable?”

“Mn? It’s all small fries around here. You won’t get anythin’ sizable unless you hunt an army of them.”

“...So you say, but you still collect them anyway, I see.”

“Course I do. It’s not much, but money’s money.”

With the hands of an expert, Haring dismantled the monster Yuri defeated, separating off the pelt, the bones, and the horns. And, opening his Proof, he stored the materials away.

When a Proof was set to dungeon mode, it was possible to use its Field to store materials. Perhaps medicinal herbs would be otherwise manageable, but for the parts of monsters far larger than one’s self, and ores far heavier than they appeared, simply transporting them would require time and effort. Not only did temporarily storing materials in another dimension release the restriction on carrying capacity, it additionally allowed them to be transported while preserving freshness and condition.

“Anyways, quit wastin’ time around here. The plants you’re looking for grow on the deeper levels, no use in loafin’ around at the entrance.”

In the dungeon, the floor number was simply the number of times one was

warped to a new location. Each warp would gradually send one to areas with higher and higher levels of danger. According to Haring, this was because it sent them deeper and deeper into untamed lands.

“Oh... Incidentally, how many floors does the dungeon have?”

“On the official record, you can apparently warp up to one hundred.”

“T-That many of them!?”

“Truth of the matter, I hear you can go even further than that, but I’ve got no clue what’s beyond there. Floor fifty and onwards...the deeper levels have some annoying monsters, loads of crazy strong enemies just prancin’ around. I doubt even that Beheader you fought made it all the way to floor one hundred.”

While Elias did lose to Yuri, he was still a skilled fighter everyone recognized. His rank was Adamant, second from the top, and having fought him personally, Yuri understood his strength better than anyone...which meant even someone of his strength hadn’t managed to make it to the furthest depths of the dungeon.

“But thanks to that, the materials you can get in the deeper levels are rarer and more valuable. The earnings are great even if you avoid battle and just go for the materials.”

Mixing in some explanation, Haring finished his dissection and lurched to his feet.

“And if you don’t hurry up, you might run into another duelist.”

“Err, is it bad for us if some other duelist comes around?”

“Nah, not bad, per se. You won’t find anyone challengin’ you to a duel for your drops in these easy levels, and no one’s gonna be out to steal what you’ve got. But the dungeon, see, it’s the salvation of a certain portion of duelists.”

“It’s...salvation?”

“Yeah, I explained how huntin’ monsters can earn you rate, right?”

Haring had definitely told him that before they went in. Hunting monsters in dungeon mode granted rate corresponding to the type and numbers slain. This

was apparently still applicable even during the course of the Babel Roulette.

However, the amount of Rate earned was barely a trifle. Yuri had checked a moment ago, and he hadn't even earned a hundred points. He hadn't gone out of his way to slay them, he was only taking down whatever he met along the way, but even so, the efficiency was worse than he could have imagined.

"I get what you wanna say. Instead of wastin' your time on monsters, goin' out and duelin' whatever random guy on the street will get you more." Haring took a look at Yuri's expression before adding, "But it's a different story for the folks whose rate's hit rock bottom. If they lose the next duel, they'll die as a duelist. Even if they win once, another loss and they're right back to cowerin' at the fear of death. Those sorts come here to earn whatever little rate they can."

Haring started on his way towards the stairs down.

"So if we don't need anything here, we should move forward and leave enough for them. We ain't gonna die without huntin', but those folks will kick the bucket without monsters to kill."

Yuri spent a while just staring at his back. And...he broke into a smile before sprinting to catch up.

"Alright! I understand!"

"...The hell are you grinnin' about?"

"I just thought, you really are a good person, Mr. Haring!"

"Shut it. I'm just teachin' you proper manners for the dungeons."

"A good person observes good manners!"

Carrying on a nonchalant exchange, the two of them set course for a lower floor.



Around the time Yuri and Haring were exchanging some light banter...

"Gnn... Do you really think he'll be okay?"

"Well, he'll be fine around these parts. The monsters aren't that dangerous."

Hiding in the shadows of a tree, Athena and Fram carefully peeked at the two

of them.

“Yeah, I know Yuri will be fine with the monsters... The problem’s Haring.”

“I’ll admit, I was surprised. I never thought he would be the one.”

Mirka had assured them, “Oh, don’t worry. I’ll get a guide for our Yuri.” Still, they came because they were worried, and this was the outcome.

“...Why did Mirka have to rely on Haring of all people? If she was gonna turn to that guy, even we woulda done a better job.”

Athena puffed out her cheeks, staring holes into Haring’s back.

“Mirka was probably trying to show some tact,” Fram suggested, lightly shrugging. “She knew Yuri was trying to invite him. It was right after he said he wanted to prove Haring wasn’t a bad guy.”

“Gnnn... I get it, but you know...”

“Yes. If you get it, then no complaining.” Fram tugged hard on Athena’s cheek. “I understand why you hate him. Unlike you, I’ve never seen his evil deeds first-hand, but I can understand why you’re worried about Yuri.”

She stroked Athena’s head, scolding her in a soft tone.

“But please do respect Yuri’s decisions. Yuri must have some reason or conviction behind going after him.”

“...But I still can’t forgive him.”

Athena reflected on a memory as she gazed at Haring’s back... A young girl cowering in fear, shedding tears and sobbing. The sight of her on the receiving end of Haring’s tumultuous outburst.

Athena had seen, she knew, and she would never forgive. She gave her head a shake to rid it of that depressing scene.

“Mnn! But right now, I’m here to watch Yuri!”

“Yes, yes. If you’re feeling better, then carry me.”

Fram jumped onto her back, and when they were ready to move to their next vantage point, a transmission came to Athena’s Proof.

“Hello, Big Sis here.”

“Hmm, I was sure you were my younger sister.”

“Oh, Eli? What’s up?”

“Check who it is before answering. So where are you right now?”

“Where? Well, I’m following Yuri through the dungeon—”

“You heard her, Stein.”

The instant Elias mentioned the name, the hairs on Athena’s tail pricked up on end. She broke into a heavy cold sweat in the tantalizingly long moment of silence that followed.

“I will convey Stein’s message word for word. ‘Athena, Fram, why, that’s quite some courage you have to ignore all my calls. You’re in for a spanking when you get back, okay?’ she says.”

“Eli, you’re really, really creepy when you imitate Mirka’s tone!”

“I see. I’ll put some effort into the impersonation next time.”

Athena cut the call, turning to Fram with a stiff smile plastered on her face.

“Fram...let’s stay in the dungeon for a while!”

“I’ll pick the right time to go home. I can say I just tagged along to rein you in.”

“No fair! You were all up for it!!”

“When you get to four-hundred-something, you learn to be unfair.”

Fram soothingly pat a wailing Athena on the shoulder.



When the dungeon and its picturesque forest scenes were touched by a hint of red, Yuri was steadily crushing one floor after another.

“That makes—three hundred!!”

He sliced through the windpipe of a mid-sized monster, taking a breather only after confirming it no longer drew breath. Haring moved in to calmly dispose of it, cutting it apart and collecting the individual materials.

This same process had simply repeated, on and on, and they had now reached the twentieth floor.

“Hah...! We’ve come quite a long way!”

“...Yeah. But the herbs you’re lookin’ for grow in the deeper levels. After you get there and collect your due, you’re spendin’ the rest of the week trainin’ in the depths.”

“Yes! I’ll do my best!!” Despite the waterfall of sweat on his brow, Yuri returned a delightful smile.

Haring took only a glance at him before returning to work. From Haring’s point of view, Yuri was trampling the dungeon at a fearsome rate. Even an experienced explorer could often only proceed ten floors—give or take—per day. That was because death was always one’s companion in the dungeon, and not only could a lethal wound lead to real death, even the most minor of injuries could lead to future incidents.

Though it was possible to warp back to the duel city with the Proof’s special dungeon feature, it was not so simple to erase the fear. Yes, even if one knew they could go back at any time, the moment they perceived a possibility of death, they would proceed with the utmost caution.

Yuri had absolutely none of that. He didn’t even think to take detours around dangerous beasts to get through floors safely. He slew whatever was in his path to take the absolute shortest route, rushing straight ahead without any rest or meals.

While he was showing signs of fatigue, his movements were no worse than they had been that morning, and if Haring told him to keep going, he would quite likely continue charging on with a smile.

Which was why Haring decided to bark an order as soon as he was done collecting.

“Oi, brat. We’re campin’ on this floor.”

“Hmm? I can still go on.”

“You might be fine, but I’m gettin’ tired here.”

“Eeh...but you’re not fighting, Mr. Haring. You don’t even look that tired.”

“It takes more time for me to take apart monsters than it does for you to murder them, goddammit. Anyways, that’s it for today. Prepare to rest.”

Operating his Proof to produce the tools, Haring prepared to set up camp like a veteran in the field. He gathered the scattered fallen leaves and branches, and using a fire charm to ignite them, he lightly roasted the preserved foods he’d packed over the flame.

“See? That’s the stuff. Now you get preparin’ to eat and sleep.”

“Err, I didn’t bring anything with me.”

“.....What?”

“Ms. Mirka told me not to bring anything apart from my weapon, so I didn’t!”

“Are you thick!? How do you plan to survive a week without any tools!?”

In dungeon diving, camping and food supplies were an absolute necessity. It was possible to instantaneously transfer back with a Proof, but it often took several days to reach the target floor, and in such cases, they would have to pass the night inside.

“No, wait, if you came empty-handed does that mean you don’t even have any food—”

“Of course, I didn’t bring any with me!”

“The hell!? Is this some new form of suicide!?”

“Don’t worry! If I need a tool, my sword is more than enough!”

Brandishing his black sword, Yuri briskly gathered vines and branches and began putting together something which he strung along the surrounding trees.

“What are you doin’?”

“It’s a trap to let us know if a monster is approaching. That one I just beat had this area boss sorta feeling, so I cut out the bladder and sprinkled it around. That should ward off the smaller and weaker ones.”

“Just how used to survival are you...”

“This one time, my master shoved me into a danger zone for a month. I only had a normal knife back then, so compared to that, this should be a piece of cake!”

“That’s one hell of a master.”

His black sword, practically his partner, in hand, Yuri began whittling away bit by bit at branches and bark. Since it was supposed to be a duelist’s weapon, it was somewhat pitiful to see it being used for something so mundane.

“Aight, I get that you know how to survive, but...what are you gonna do about a week’s worth of food? To be clear, I only brought enough for myself. Don’t plan on sharin’.”

In the first place, when he accepted the guide request from Mirka, he was placed under a strict order not to lend a hand to Yuri no matter what happened. That, of course, applied to food as well.

But Yuri didn’t seem to mind this in the slightest. He raised up an impromptu sack folded from a large leaf.

“I’m fine on food! I managed to gather some when you were busy dismantling, so at the very least, I’ll have a feast today!”

“Yeah...well, we’re in a forest and all. I’m sure there’s plenty’a fruit growin’ around.”

As a matter of fact, Haring had filled his stomach with wild plants and fruit a number of times when he was troubled for food. He would use the dungeon to stave off his hunger whenever he was running short on cash.

“Oh, no, fruits are good as a source of moisture. You need to achieve a good balance with your meals, and you won’t be able to move right without the right calories!” Yuri said as he unfurled the leaf bag on the spot.

Its contents consisted of—bugs. No matter how Haring looked at it, they were bugs. Adults and larvae alike, the live insects wriggled and squirmed over the leaf. The moment he saw this, Haring went pale at the face.

“Freak... You’re really gonna eat that?”

“What’s wrong? They’re all filled with protein, you know?”

“I didn’t ask about their nutritional value!”

“I’ve tried them all before, so they should be safe! There are a few poisonous ones, but they’re generally fine as long as you remove the poisonous organs!”

“How ’bout you notice the more fundamental problem here...!!”

Haring’s protests fell upon deaf ears, as Yuri began crushing the bugs between his teeth, his head in a curious tilt. The fearsome squelching noises quite nearly caused the dragon man to lose his appetite.

After witnessing such a scene, Haring listlessly stretched out over the ground.

“...Good grief. If I wasn’t being paid so well, I’d be gone by now.”

“Come to think of it, Mr. Haring, are you acquainted with Ms. Mirka?”

“Acquainted? I wouldn’t go that far. That lady’s always at the reception desk, so we see each other a lot, is all. More importantly,” Haring muttered, narrowing his eyes, “What’s *your* relationship with her?”

“I wouldn’t call it a relationship... I’m the freeloader, and Ms. Mirka is the landlord?”

“Hah? Pull the other one! Who the hell pays that ridiculous amount for a freeloader?”

Honestly, this request reeked to high heaven. It was oftentimes the case that being a dungeon guide was a high-paying request. Not only was the guide themselves placed in danger, they would have to lead a clueless liability around with them. At the very least, a guide’s fee would be ten times the cost of the day jobs posted at town hall. On top of that, they were generally allowed to keep half of the collected materials.

The market value of a guide was high, and this request paid close to five times that.

That wasn’t all. The job listing was, specifically, to “lead the individual to the deeper levels without any assistance aside from explanation,” and this was to be strictly adhered to even if the individual was on the verge of death.

The guide was allowed to claim rights over every single thing collected apart from the designated herbs. Meaning materials collected along the way went

straight into Haring's wallet.

Despite all this, Yuri simply tilted his head and groaned.

"Hrmm... Ms. Mirka's a pretty enigmatic person..."

"You can live with someone that mysterious...?"

"Well, I know she's not a bad person. She helps me out in things besides my living situation as well, so I have to get stronger to meet her expectations!" Yuri forcefully answered, clenching his fist.

The sight caused Haring to ask what had been floating around his head. "You, kid, why are you so obsessed with strength?"

"Why? Well...getting stronger is what makes me happy, and fighting is fun, isn't it!?"

"Hah... Sorry, you lost me there."

Haring wasn't putting up a front; those were words from the heart.

"I've never thought I wanted to be strong, and I've never found fightin' any fun. It just turned out duelin' was the job suited for me, and I knew it would make me some coin."

It wasn't as if everyone was like Yuri, coming to the duel city with dreams of being a duelist. That was precisely why...looking at someone like Yuri irritated him to no end.

"Not like anythin' you do's gonna change how the world ticks."

When Haring was about to voice his frustrations—

"You lost me! I don't get that way of thinking at all!" Yuri beamingly replied, his words filled with confidence. "I mean, of course, nothing's going to change if I do nothing. But if I take action, at the very least, it creates the *possibility* for something to change."

He spoke with sparkles in his eyes.

"And if the possibility exists, I'll try out anything. I know it'll all stay the same if I don't at least go that far."

A mix-blood, the weakest existence. Yuri understood better than anyone how

reckless it was to try and overturn this reality. But Yuri's actions had created a *possibility*, his tremendous effort allowing him to grasp at it, faint as it was, and overturn the title of weakest.

"I want to have fun fighting. If I want to have fun fighting alongside Athena and Fram, I have to get much, much stronger than I am right now...meaning, you get how it is!"

Perhaps due to the passion he put into it, Yuri's words were becoming completely incoherent. But...perhaps that was precisely what allowed him to surmount the walls set before him.

"You're the same as me, aren't you?"

"Hah? What makes you say that?"

"I mean, you're trying to earn a lot of money, aren't you? Getting stronger, making money, the point is, it's a means to a goal. That's why, Mr. Haring, you must have a goal, right?"

Yuri cast his words while directing pure and radiant eyes at Haring. He was making a convoluted sort of sense. Earning money was a means to achieve the goal of *living*, and not many people would call making money in and of itself their goal.

"Who knows? Don't know if I'd call it a goal." After speaking those self-deriding words, Haring turned his back to play it off. "Talk over. I'm gonna sleep."

"Eeh!? I still want to talk about all sorts of things!"

"Shut it. Go bother someone else."

"But you're the only one here."

"Then try talkin' to the trees and grass. Who knows? They just might talk back."

"Are you, by chance, treating me like a crazy person!?"

"It's the truth, ain't it? If you don't like trees, then go trap a monster and—"

The moment Haring was about to offer some arbitrary words, a large clamor

broke out from somewhere nearby. At the same time, a vine near Yuri gave off a twang as it was pulled taut.

This was topped off by a woman's hysterical shriek of, "—Whoah!? What in the world happened to me!?"

The two exchanged a look before Yuri tried reeling the vine in. It wasn't long before a glimmer of gold emerged from the thicket. The form of a young woman, both her arms entangled, crawling along the ground. Tell-tale pointed ears sprouted through the gaps in her hair.

"Urgh...hic, I'm a failure... To be caught in such a trap is my life's biggest blunder..."



After carefully observing the sobbing Elf Tribe girl, Yuri hit his hands together at the sudden realization.

“...I found someone to bother!”

“Shut your yap and get her outta there already. Halfwit.”

Haring gave his head a forceful whack in an attempt to get some of his loose screws back in place.



“—I am in debt! In your greatest debt!!”

The elven girl wept as she stuffed her cheeks with Haring’s dried fish.

“For me to accidentally drop all my food is life’s biggest blunder!”

Chewing furiously, the girl who introduced herself as Eleanor explained why she had been on the verge of collapse. Every time she moved her mouth to chew, her pointed ears twitched back and forth in delight.

Those ears could be none other than a trait of the Elf Tribe.

“Truly, thank you, thank you!”

“Don’t worry about it. I can’t just abandon someone in trouble, and you’re from the Elf Tribe, just like my mother. We must have met for a reason!”

“Oh, as expected of Human Tribe! Wonderful people filled with duty and humanity!”

“E-err... Thank you.” Yuri replied, somewhat perplexed as Eleanor locked him in a hard embrace.

However, Haring’s expression remained grim the whole time. “...Oi, you, elf who uses strange words.”

“Yes? What wrong, Big Boy?”

“Brat, go dump the elf somewhere this instant.”

“Erk!? I so sorry! Common-tongue a little hard for elf!”

Perhaps having sensed Haring’s wrath, Eleanor immediately hid behind Yuri. She definitely had a strange way with words, but it was understandable if she

wasn't accustomed to the common tongue.

Watching Eleanor cower, Haring scratched his head as if to say this was going to be a pain.

"...The name's Haring. I heard you dropped your food supplies, but if you'd just shoved it all in your Proof, it woulda been impossible to misplace."

Just as it was possible to preserve materials harvested in the dungeon, Haring had stored his food and tools in his Proof. That was the fundamental means of storage when exploring. If she had kept it in her Proof, then losing food would be impossible.

It would be another story if she was attacked while eating and was forced to flee...but in Eleanor's case, that was even more implausible. At least, going by what was glimmering on her left arm—a Gold Proof.

That glimmer told a definite tale of strength.

"There's no way a Gold Rank would struggle against the monsters in these parts. If you say you lost your food, then you got some explainin' to do."

His shades of wariness growing stronger, Haring glared at Eleanor. Sensing his dangerous aura, Yuri couldn't help but speak up.

"Err... Mr. Haring, what are you being so cautious about?"

"You gotta learn there's always some guy or gal out there with some stupid thoughts in their head. The sort who'll sneak up on a duelist during rest time to snatch their food and tools. Even some who'll aim for when we're all tuckered out to force you into a surprise duel." Haring continued on with a disgusted look on his face, "Now, if you ain't one of them, then get talkin'. If you can't do that, then get lost, or use your Proof to return to the city."

His voice lowered, shifting into a threatening timbre.

Eleanor stared hard at Haring before—she suddenly burst into tears again.

"I...left behind by comrades..."

"Left behind? Then Ms. Eleanor, who did you come with?"

"With people from my team...but my mistake, I separate from people who

came with me..."

The tears flowing drip by drip, Eleanor tried her best to explain through shoddy words.

"Then call them on your Proof, for God's sake. The warp points only change every seven days, so they can still come back for you, and if you're lost, they should be lookin' for you, right?"

"Didn't work... When I beg Tenebre come back, he really angry, tell me to figure out myself..."

"What sorta teammate is that..." Haring said with a sigh.

Eleanor sniffled before replying, "I, weakest one in team...so I come to dungeon for first time to get materials from deep floor make better weapon... Try to be useful..."

"Tsk... If you got no interest in this place, I get how you could make it to Gold without ever comin' here. But if you're lost and out of food, just get out."

"Hic... I so sorry... Soon other teams start training here together, so thought I have no other chance. Couldn't go back..."

Eleanor hugged her knees while glumly lowering her shoulders.

Yuri turned back to Haring.

"Umm, Mr. Haring—"

"Not happenin'. My request was to guide you. That's it." Haring cut him off before he could even make his proposal. "There's no guarantee that gal's tellin' the truth. I mean, just look at what she's wearin'. You try tellin' me that ain't suspicious."

"Grr! I can understand you make fun of my clothing!"

She couldn't just ignore that one. Eleanor angrily puffed out her cheeks.

But Haring did have a point. She wore a deep-green, oversized tunic fastened by a golden sash around her waist. Peeking out from its lower hem, a pair of black short shorts.

Clothing did vary somewhat from tribe to tribe, but at the very least, none of

the elves Yuri saw in town dressed anywhere close to Eleanor. Naturally, his mother didn't either.

Seeing a change in their eyes, Eleanor proudly puffed out her chest. "These clothings the traditional uniform of a ninja!"

"...Hah? The hell's up with that?"

"Oh, I've heard of them before. As I recall, on the eastern-most edge of human territory, there were once warriors who went by that name. My master told me about it."

"Not what I meant. I'm sayin', why's there an elf in ancient human-tribe clothing?"

"That is, hup...because I read book!"

She reached a hand into the baggy chest area of her tunic and flaunted her findings at the two of them: a single decrepit old tome.

Yuri took it and tried flipping through a few pages.

"Umm... This is a complete work of fiction, isn't it?"

"Yes! My friend said they got from Human Tribe in duel city!"

Based on a quick skim, it seemed to be a work of fiction set in the east of the Human Continent depicting the exploits of long-gone warriors called ninja and samurai.

"I look up to ninja so much, I become duelist!"

"Yeah, you're definitely wearing the same clothing as the illustrations."

"I work really, really hard and make it myself!" She did a twirl on the spot to show off her masterpiece. "I wanted teach all sorts of people about ninja! So I do same training as ninja, and come to duel city to fight like ninja!"

She spoke of her reasoning with sheer jubilation on her face.

"And now, I become perfect ninja elf! See, see!"

"There's a strange impact to it, when she says it out loud..."

"I don't know jack about 'em, but even I can tell that's a dangerous combo."

The two weighed in before Yuri looked back at the book. Soon, his expression softened.

“Mr. Haring, I really think we should take Ms. Eleanor along.”

“Mn? No means no.”

“I mean, she seems like a good person.”

“Tsk... This again.”

Once again, Haring made no attempt to hide his irritation. He clicked his tongue for everyone to hear.

“You bein’ an idiot who’ll trust anyone ain’t none of my business. But—”

“It’s not like I’ll trust just anyone.” Yuri cut Haring off and held the book high. “This book was published a long, long time ago. She’s read it so many times the pages are all worn out, and she still carries it around like a priceless treasure... That’s the sort of person Ms. Eleanor is.”

He flashed his teeth in a refreshing smile.

“And I trust myself more than I trust anyone else. That means if I trust someone, I’ll believe they’re a good person no matter what everyone says.”

After he had said that much, Yuri found himself scratching his face. “...Umm, is that not a good enough reason?”

“You really are dumb. Of course not, it’s right out,” Haring immediately replied, before letting out a deep sigh. “Oi, weeb elf.”

“Yes!? I do something wrong!?”

“Talkin’ with the brat hurts my brain, so you keep him company. As long as you can do that, then you can tag along or whatever,” he announced, to blank stares, before ambling to his feet.

“Where are you going, Mr. Haring?”

“Gotta find somethin’ to eat. That elf there took my dinner.”

And leaving these words, Haring disappeared into the depths of the thicket. Yuri and Eleanor were alone now, and they exchanged a curious look.

“...Can come along now?”

“Probably, I think that’s what happened?”

Eleanor’s face lit up. “.....! I really am thank you, thank you!”

“Whoah!? I-I didn’t do anything!”

“I so happy I able to meet you!”

Overcome with emotion, Eleanor embraced Yuri again and patted his head all over. The thinness of her clothing made this somewhat unsettling.

“I also so thankful to Haring! He is very good person!”

“Yes! Mr. Haring really is a good person, you know!” Yuri burst into a grin. “I mean—he’s someone I believe in!”



Away from his irksome company, Haring proceeded straight through the forest. His objective, of course, had nothing to do with securing food.

While he told Yuri he only had enough food for one, he had actually prepared enough for two, in case of emergency. Even if Eleanor was added to the mix, it would be no issue with some careful planning.

The true reason Haring entered the forest—

“How long are you gonna hover over us? Stupid fox, shrimp spirit.”

His declaration to the trees was quickly met by the furious rustling of leaves. A short while later came the thud of something falling.

“Kkhh... I hit...my bum...!”

“Don’t worry, I used you as a stepping stone, so I’m fine.”

The two appeared from the shadows with a carefree exchange.

Haring took one good look over them and sighed. “You only caught up to us a moment ago, that means you ain’t familiar with the dungeon either. Any more deadweights and I won’t be able to cope. Please, one of you, any of you, someone just go home.”

“...How can you tell?”

As Athena pursed her lips, Haring dropped a handful of sand from his palm.

“I’ve been usin’ my power to periodically send out sand and check for stalkers. The brat’s annoyingly famous, so I thought some idiot might try’n start somethin’.”

He wouldn’t mind if someone tried to initiate a duel purely to test Yuri’s strength. But there was no guarantee all duelists would be so sincere.

Perhaps they would lead a flock of monsters to the transfer point to block their way. Perhaps they would pretend to attack a monster, inflicting real injury and crippling their actual target. Perhaps they would set up camp on their destination floor, monopolizing the herbs they wanted, and demanding an exorbitant price for them... There was no end to the types of foul play one could commit.

As the dungeon’s warps were treated as a temporary leave from the city, Duel City Babel did not have a complete grasp of whatever went on there. There was always a set amount of people who would use this for evil.

Haring knew more about these sorts than anyone.

“But thanks to the brat rushin’ onward at an abnormal speed, a majority of them dropped out, threw in the towel. I’m surprised you two managed to keep up.”

“Of course, that’s...because we’re worried about Yuri.” Athena’s voice lowered. She turned to him with dangerous eyes filled with wrath. “When we knew you would be with him, we couldn’t stop chasing him. Not ever.”

Her hand reached for her sword, and she entered an angered ready-stance. It was all too clear who the target of her malice was.

“Because you’re a villain.”

He had heard that voice all too many times. He had seen those eyes all too many times.

“It’s because of you...that child quit as a duelist. Crying, cowering to the end, lowering her sad face, she left the duel city.”

The sight of the girl still remained vivid in her memory. Bound by a contract

and the fear of death, her legs shook up to the last moment.

“That’s why I can’t forgive the fact you can continue to be a duelist.”

A murderous intent seeped into the air around her. Haring was no fool, but still, he simply offered a disinterested scoff.

“Hah... It’s just one kid. How long are you gonna hold a grudge?” He shrugged, then sent her a sneer. “It’s got nothin’ to do with me. I was paid a fortune just to watch the kid. I did the job I was paid for, it’s none of my business what happens after that.”

Haring needed money no matter what. He accepted the offer proposed by the group of duelists. And Haring kept watch over the cheated newcomers, making sure they wouldn’t run away. That’s all there was to the story. Nothing more, and nothing less.

“I’ll do any job for money—that’s just how I do business.”

His words now caused Athena to draw her sword.

“...Release!!”

Her turquoise eyes were touched by crimson; nine silver tails unfurled from her back like the petals of a lotus flower. Leaving it all to her wrath, Athena swung her great sword in white, searing flames.

The moment they were about to wash over Haring, tendrils of sand shot up from the ground, covering and smothering them out. The sand swallowed the white flames whole, stealing away the momentum of the ferocious inferno.

“If you wanna call me a villain—how about you at least follow the rules?”

Athena glared at him through the suspended clouds of sand.

“Our compatibility is the worst, you shoulda realized that last time we fought.”

Haring had fought Athena once before. When she witnessed him with the girl who had escaped from the group, Haring had challenged her himself—and managed to defeat her. He didn’t evade arrest, but he was able to achieve his objective.

Ignoring the agonized grimace on Athena's face, Haring turned to Fram.

"You, shrimp, take that idiot and get lost already."

"You have a point. We'll be going now."

"Wha—Fram!? Why are you listening to him!?"

"There's little else we can do. Launching an attack outside of a duel is out of the question for a duelist. While there is a major problem with his attitude, this time, it's your fault for attacking first."

Fram showered Athena with cold words, putting a damper on her heightened emotions.

"Haring, you'll do any job for money, won't you?"

"That's what I said. I'll do whatever I'm paid for, no exceptions."

"Then that's a relief. Now that Mirka's already paid you, that means you're definitely going to return Yuri to us. But—" said Fram with a smile, "If anything should happen to our Yuri, I'll kill you before this kid even gets the chance."

Letting off enough murderous intent to freeze an entire body, Fram turned and walked off. Athena was soon to follow—only to suddenly come to a stop.

"...Haring, one more promise," she said and turned back to him with serious eyes, "When he gets back—make sure Yuri can say he had fun."



Her eyes now carried neither anger nor disgust. These were words spoken out of pure concern for Yuri.

“Tsk...” Haring clicked his tongue and nodded, “Fine I promise, now leave already. You stupid fox.”

Without another word, Athena turned and left. The bodies of the two girls were enveloped in a pale blue light, and after that they were gone. Not a trace remained.

“Good grief...that brat’s got some scary company.”

Thinking back to the two women, Haring couldn’t help but break into a sardonic smirk. At the same time, he reflected on Athena’s anger. He didn’t find it particularly unpleasant.

Athena’s reaction was understandable, exceedingly typical, unavoidable. The fact she harbored such anger towards Haring was proof of her own decency. And for the fact that such decent duelists existed, Haring couldn’t be any more...thankful.

“Now...that’s one matter off the table. Guess I should get back to the brat.”

Scratching up his hair, Haring stuck a hand into his pocket.

A grubby copper coin smeared in finger marks.

He would do any job he was paid for, no matter what. He had exchanged such a promise, once upon a time.

For someone with no goals such as himself, if he didn’t keep it that way, he wouldn’t be able to find a reason to fight. So even if it was hopeless on his own —

“—As long as I’m paid, I’ll keep my promises no matter what.”

He convinced himself and flipped the coin.

Chapter 3

The addition of Eleanor did little to slow down their progress.

Monsters were hardly treated as a threat and were immediately cut down should they so much as think to block their path. They pressed on, resting as sparingly as possible.

As Haring would put it, this was a party of “idiots rushin’ to their death.” But insults wouldn’t make Yuri rest. Every scene his eyes took in was so new, so fresh; he was driven by a strong desire to see what lay beyond every next bend.

And—

“Floor fifty! We did it!” Yuri roared.

The transfer gate put them on the ledge of a craggy mountain. A steep drop behind them, a cliff in front, and a winding path on both sides...

“It’s floor fifty, Mr. Haring! I was counting, there’s no way I’m wrong!”

Haring delivered a forceful whack to Yuri’s head to curb his enthusiasm. “Shut it, fool! Make too much noise and the monsters will rush in! Good grief... These floors ain’t so rare to me or any—”

“Whoooah!! So this is legendary land from book *Ninja x Samurai*! Where specters run rampant, the peerless world of darkness—and its name is Neo-Saitama!”

“Why is that the only thing you can say clearly, bloody weeb elf!?”

Just like Yuri, Eleanor’s excitement had peaked, and as she energetically cried out, she was similarly whacked.

“Ow... Haring harsh...”

“You know...it’s just you, Mr. Haring. You’re the only one who kept insisting we needed to take a break.”

“If you don’t rest your body, it won’t move right when you need it to. And

listen here, you damn brats, if you had anyone else as your guide, you'd have left them in the dust ages ago."

Haring said this not only to Yuri but to Eleanor as well. Eleanor had kept up with them without ever initiating a break herself.

Normally, an elf's physical capabilities ranked relatively low among the eight tribes. They were physically even weaker than humans, but living in lands filled with forests made them extremely nimble.

Their vision and hearing were both excellent. This allowed them to easily snipe from afar or take covert action. Add in some proficiency in magic and they were a tribe highly suited for the backline. At least, that was what Yuri remembered hearing from Fram.

Eleanor's sharp movements fit the bill perfectly, and by weaving in some rather unique techniques of her own, she kept her stamina expenditure to the bare minimum.

"As expected of Ms. Eleanor! You're not a Ninja Elf for nothing!!"

"Hmhmm! You flatter me!"

"...Well, appearance and language barrier aside, she is a Gold Rank." Haring sighed, rather tired out by their exchange, and lifted his head. "Ah, whatever. Now that we're in the deeper levels, we're shiftin' over to harvestin' duty. I know what herbs the brat needs, but elf, what do you need for your weapon?"

"Err... Blacksmith said I need this!"

Eleanor took out a note, and Haring gave it a good look-over.

"Fermatite, sky-eye, blood-seal stone...you'll have to mine for them."

"I-Is hard?"

"Not hard, but you'll need patience and luck. You don't even have the tools, do you?"

"Do not!"

"Shut it, that's nothin' to be proud of. Calm your tits."

Slapping Eleanor's note against her forehead, Haring scratched his head in

thought.

“Brat, your herbs can wait. Let her get her ores.”

“I don’t mind whatsoever, but is there anything I can help with?”

“Do whatever you want. My job was to guide you to the depths, and watch you. What you do here ain’t none of my business.”

“Rather, Mr. Haring, you’re no longer against helping her out, I see.”

“We’ve already come all the way here... Rather than you lot wastin’ time searchin’ in the dark, it’ll be much more efficient if I throw in a hand,” he awkwardly replied before staring at the rockface of the cliff. He placed his right hand against the bare rock, and soon pebbles began to gather around it.

Only his right hand was covered—Haring himself didn’t change.

“Oh...is that also Dragonification? You can selectively change only a portion of your body?”

“You’re supposed to be a mix-blood. Are you saying you didn’t know?”

“Ahaha... I definitely have some dragon in me, but I’ve only ever used it to strengthen my bones.”

“Well yeah, that’s the Dragon Tribe’s steel bones trait. It’s somethin’ any dragonkin has, nothing special. The power we invoke with Dragonification is like the Beast Tribe, in that it’s related to our ancestors.”

“My father did his best to get together the names and subspecies of the people I supposedly take after, but the documents were all so old, I really don’t know anything about the details...”

“Well then, try sayin’ the name. I might know a thing or two.”

“Err, I’m getting the feeling the name was Nidhögggr.”

The moment he repeated the name he heard from his father, Haring looked at him dubiously.

“...That ain’t much of a name, more of a description really.”

“You know about it, Mr. Haring?”

“That word you used is ancient dragonic. The language ain’t around no more, but the village I’m from carried on this old-ass religion, so we used a bit of it in ceremonies from time to time.”

Haring made a bitter expression. He must not have had very good memories of his homeland.

“Eater of corpses, stealer of branches—that’s what it means,” Haring said before painstakingly scratching his head. “But even if I know what it means, I don’t know what powers that gives you.”

“Yes, that really isn’t too clear...”

“The documents you’re talking about probably come from the legends and ceremonies of a village where he’s deified. I’m assumin’ they’re in ancient dragonic too. If you get the chance, bring ’em to me, and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Oh? Is that alright?”

“Not for free, of course. I’ll do any job for a price.”

Seeing Haring’s smug grin, Yuri couldn’t help but return a wry smile of his own.

Haring turned back to the rocks, determining there wasn’t anything else he could do on the matter, and returned to describing Dragonification.

“Don’t know about what you’ve got, but Dragonification is something like a magic exercised by the dragon blood running through our veins. In human terms, it’s a form of alchemy. You manipulate the four basic elements to wear a new substance, alter it, and reform it,” Haring explained, showing his transformed right hand. “What you can manipulate changes based on blood. Those folks with fire dragon blood use fire, and water dragons can turn their whole bodies into water. It’s earth, in my case...sand, to be more precise.”

“Really? It’s not stone?”

“Stone is an amalgamation of minerals. Gather up sand, harden it, and you get stone. Carefully select out the iron sand, and you can get iron. Gather up silica sand, you can even make crystal. But carefully selectin’ out the right sand takes way too much time; it slows down the Dragonification. That’s why I

usually just use what's lying around."

"Hmm...it's surprisingly versatile."

Keeping a close watch on Haring's arm, Yuri ruminated over his words to further his knowledge. Understanding the Tribe Skills he had inherited was an absolute necessity if he wanted to use Tribal Armament.

To duelists, Tribe Skills were the core of their strategy. They were abilities that could completely turn the tides of battles, so without these opportunities, he couldn't ask for the details on them.

"Come to think of it, and this is a little late...but are you sure you should tell me about your Tribe Skill?"

"Tsk... A bit late for that. I've already lost to you. What's the harm in teachin' you about a losin' strategy? Just means I need to find something new."

As if he had recalled his defeat, Haring began taking out his frustration by punching the rockface. From his usual crude speech and the image of him as a giant stone dragon, it was easy to misunderstand, but he apparently put quite a bit of thought into battle.

"Hey, quit slackin'. Start shatterin' rock. Weeb elf, hold the fragments up to the sun. See anythin' that shines funny, you report it to me."

"Got it! I'll do my best punching the wall!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

As Eleanor began holding small fragments up to the sun, Yuri imitated Haring and looked at the wall.

"...!!"

He lunged forward, he smacked it with all his might...but not only did he fail to open a hole, he didn't crumble it in the slightest. If that wasn't enough, the sensation from his fist seemed off, somehow.

Appearance-wise, it was like any other rocky cliff, but it didn't feel like punching hard rock or steel. It was as if some invisible substance had rejected his fist.

“How is it? Not as easy as it looks, eh?”

“Right. I feel like I’m being repelled.”

“Thought so. You ever heard of mana veins?”

“Umm...that’s the mana that flows through the ground, right?”

“Right. Out here in the depths, the mana veins are larger, thicker than anywhere else. That’s what makes the monsters bigger and stronger, and plants that feed off of mana-filled water have all sorts of benefits,” Haring said, showing off a fragment he had broken off.

“The rocks are the same. The earth keeps sucking up mana, so the mineral deposits get coated in the stuff and become stronger against physical trauma. When it crystallizes, you get ores with magical properties...in short, what wee elf is searching for.”

“So we’re already at the right place!”

“Yeah. When it’s this hard, we should smack right into a vein just randomly diggin’ around,” Haring replied before getting right back to work. “Well, there’s a trick to what I’m doin’ here. It ain’t a feat anyone can pick up, and if you think you can’t do it, you can just help sort.”

“No—I think I’ve got the idea.” Rejecting Haring’s proposal, Yuri swung his arm like a hammer—and made a cracking, snapping sound upon impact. Minuscule fragments chipped away from the surface.

“You coat your fist with mana to repel the mana from the cliff... Am I doing it right?”

“Not bad at all. How did you notice?”

“The sound your punches make is different. The reason you used Dragonification on your right hand was to wear the same mana as the earth here, right?”

“You got it. The mana here disperses physical force, so if you hit it with the same mana—the flow goes all out of whack, and your attack gets through.”

Yuri required no further prompting to punch the rocks again. As a result, he finally managed to open a small divot, but...

“Oww... It kinda really, really hurts!”

“Why do you look happy about that? You a masochist or somethin’?”

“At least say I’m feeling delighted by a brand-new sensation!”

“It ain’t brand new or anythin’. If your force ain’t gettin’ dispersed, you’re just back to punchin’ rock with your bare hands. You Human Tribe are feeble compared to us dragons, so if you hit it normally, of course, it’s gonna hurt,” the dragon pointed out in a tired tone. The fact that Haring, who was similarly punching rock, came out completely unscathed really stood as a testament to the sturdiness of the Dragon Tribe.

“It’s because you’re just focusin’ mana. Back when you fought the Beheader, you used multiple Tribe Skills, didn’t you? Try doin’ it like that.”

“Got it! But...you’re pretty knowledgeable about that battle.”

Haring seemed to know about his fight with Elias in detail, so he’d asked on reflex...but the dragon’s face was quick to sour, as if to say he had messed up.

“...Anyone who’s got an eye on you’s seen the broadcast at least once. That’s just how much of a threat your Tribal Armament is, and you’re a person of interest in the Babel Roulette—”

“Meaning, Mr. Haring, you’ve got an eye on me, I see!”

“Shut up, stay away!”

He kicked Yuri away as he tried to approach and backed off.

“You do the rest on your own, brat. I’m gonna take a nap.”

“Eeeh!? Doesn’t that sound kinda unfair!?”

“I told you I ain’t gonna do nothin’ once we reach the depths. You’re the one who picked up the elf, so you do somethin’ about it.”

Finding a random rock to lean against, Haring closed his eyes.

But Yuri turned back to the cliff without a word. The sensation of wearing mana like clothing. The sensation of an impact his body was supposed to receive dispersing instead. They were both...similar to when his brain’s limits remained undone.

He still hadn't grasped precisely what it was.

"In that case—I'll just repeat it until I get it!!"

To ascertain the uncertainty, Yuri swung his fists again.



When Haring opened his eyes, the sun had already slipped past the center of the sky. They had arrived on floor fifty early that morning, and with that in mind, he had evidently fallen into a far deeper sleep than he'd expected. He shook his head to snap his mind to attention, when he heard a cheerful call from Eleanor.

"Oh, Haring up!"

Eleanor had made quite some progress in sorting. There were a number of rubble piles around where she sat on the ground.

"Wazzat... If you finished, you coulda woken me up."

"When I try wake you, Yuri stop me! You were looking out for us all way here, so he says you rest for now."

Sure enough, he'd had to keep an eye on both of them along the way, and he had been keeping alert to make sure no other duelists were around, so he was more worn out than usual. That must have been why he slept so soundly, but...he didn't expect Yuri to notice something like that.

"...Damn brat. Too tactful for his own good." He cursed at someone who wasn't around and scratched up his hair. "So where is he?"

"Yuri? He probably still in there."

Haring looked in the direction Eleanor pointed and lost his words. The rockface had barely been dented that morning, and now it had become a hole so deep he couldn't see the end. Even now, destructive popping sounds could be heard echoing from its depths.

"...Has he been doin' that this whole time?"

"Yuri do it the whole time. Doesn't answer when I call, just keeps hitting and hitting wall."

Just as Eleanor finished speaking, the destructive noises abruptly came to a halt. They were soon replaced by the footsteps of someone running.

“Ms. Eleanor! I brought more rubble!”

Carrying the debris from the tunnel in two arms, he let it clatter down in front of the entrance.

“Alright, I’m off again!”

“No you ain’t.” Haring grasped him by the neck before he could disappear.

“Mr. Haring. Did you sleep well?”

“Thanks to you. We’re workin’ on rotation from now on.”

“Oh no, I can still keep going!”

Yuri’s muddy, grimy face furled into a smile. But...his right hand was already in tatters. After hitting it into the wall so many times, its surface was worn out, bleeding all over. Likely from fragments that broke off more forcefully, there was an innumerable amount of scratches and scrapes running down his arm as well.

He had simply given his undivided attention to punching a wall. He would keep pressing forward until he was satisfied.

“...I see. No wonder they’re so overprotective of you.”

“Hmm? What are you talking about?”

“Nothin’, nothin’. Anyway, that’s it for today. You already got enough. We’ll all start sortin’ out the magic ores.”

After lightly tapping Yuri on the head, Haring turned back to Eleanor.

“Elf, show me the rocks you picked out. I’ll appraise them for you... But before that, throw away the useless scrap. Wouldn’t want them mixed in.”

Haring frowned, seeing that she had sifted through a small mountain. But Eleanor tilted her head with a blank look on her face.

“No, not useless scrap. This what pick out.”

“What? It’s hard to tell with that accent ‘a yours.”

“Err, umm...this! These are one that glow!” She flapped her hands, gesturing at the mountain, doing her best to explain.

Haring furrowed his brow. He picked up one of the rocks and tried holding it up to the sun. When it basked in the sun’s rays, it filled with the glow of mana, which rippled across its surface like a surging tide. This was undoubtedly the sort of ore Eleanor was looking for, but...

“This...ain’t on the level of fermatite and sky-eye. Rouge-redstone, heavy crystal, scarletite, spring-jade...there are even stones here I’ve never seen before.”

“And they’re all pretty big too!”

“I-Is big discovery!?”

Yuri and Eleanor’s expressions lit up as they looked at the pile of raw ores. But Haring’s expression was gradually growing grimmer.

“Sure, it’s a mountain of treasure, but...this ain’t right.”

“Hmm? Is it that incredible?”

“Wrong. I’m sayin’ it’s impossible for there to be so much ore left untouched.”

As magic ores were only generated in lands rich with mana, they could only be produced in the deeper levels of the dungeons. They were consequently rare and valuable, enough so that at times duels would break out over ownership rights.

“Sure, we’re in the deeper levels, but we’re still at floor fifty. This is the sorta place seasoned explorers will come just for a light stroll, and even the lower ranks can make it here easy, so long as they got a guide like me. The valuable materials should all be stripped away.”

“In that case...were we coincidentally warped somewhere no one’s been before?”

“Granted, we entered right after the warp points shifted. There’s a chance we’re just lucky...but that doesn’t explain this one.”

Picking out one of the stones, he held it up high for all to see. Black, so dark it

sucked in even the light around it...it was as if the rock was an embodiment of darkness itself.

“Witching Stone... This one only forms on floor ninety and up.”

“F-Floor ninety...that’s practically the very bottom, isn’t it!?”

“That’s why I’m tellin’ you it’s impossible. This thing is sayin’ impossible things too.”

After tampering with his Proof, the three of them confirmed what it said.

Current Floor: _____ [Helden].

The space where it should have displayed a floor number was left ominously blank. Next to this emptiness was a series of bizarre characters from some language Yuri couldn’t decipher.

“Any of you know what that says?”

“What could it be... I think I’ve seen that script in my father’s books.”

“This probably letters no longer used! Friend who gave me book, high elf who loves collect ancient document! Similar to what saw there!” Eleanor stared hard at the letters, but eventually dropped her shoulders disappointedly. “But cannot read...”

“That ain’t a problem. The problem is that our situation is impossible.”

Haring lightly poked Eleanor’s head before standing and looking behind. The transfer gate they used to reach the depths... As long as they passed through it, they would be able to return to the forty-ninth floor.

“We’re goin’ back this instant. No need to overstay our welc—”

The moment Haring was about to instruct them, the area surrounding the gate was blown away with a thunderous roar.

“...Voice, voice, beast?”

Words like an incoherent ramble pierced through the gale of dust.

“Nay...no beast. Only mortal, mortal.”

The three of them had fallen silent. At the site of the blast stood a single man.

A giant. His scar-ridden physique far surpassed Haring's large build.

"Mortal, mortal...mortals made it here."

A face covered in an iron mask turned in their direction. A large spear with a golden glimmer leaned against each shoulder. A pair of decaying wings swayed like a cape on his back.

"Making it here...makes them duelists."

The moment he heard those words, Haring grabbed his two companions and jumped down the cliff below.

"Dragonification!!"

Before hitting the ground, he gathered sand from the bare rock below him and used it to form a body. But the one he formed this time wasn't as large as the one he made before. He made it just hard enough to endure the fall.

He had to omit anything unnecessary; otherwise, they would never get away from that man.

"Mr. Haring!? What's wrong!?"

"Why we run from that person!?"

"Shut up! I'll explain later, let me concentrate!"

Throwing the two of them onto his back, Haring slid down the steep slope, scraping away rock on the way down. He needed to create as much distance from that man as possible.

Bounding off and correcting his posture mid-air, he lifted his head to get one last look at the one on the cliffs. Just one look at the man readying his spears had him instinctively taking the next leap.

"Divine Might—Might of the Sacred Tree Meliades."

No matter how calmly the words were uttered, they entered the ear like a cursed proclamation of death.

"No, no duelists here...only a fool doth present his back in battle."

All manner of emotion mingling with his voice, the large man brandished his twin spears.

“May the fools receive—the retribution of the Morning Star.”

With his sing-song words, the man swung both spears towards his feet, and everything in sight was plastered over in a blinding red light.

The ledge he stood on had been sliced cleanly through without a sound. Only a few seconds later did it rumble and collapse as if finally remembering the law of gravity.

Gazing up in awe at the sight, Haring grabbed Yuri and Eleanor off his back and let his earthen outer body shatter to break their fall.

“—Oi! You guys better not be injured! Speak up!”

“W-We’re alright! More importantly, who is that guy!?” Yuri asked, staring at the man standing tall above the cliffs.

“That man’s a duelist like us!”

“A duelist... He is!?”

“You didn’t see? He had a Proof on his left arm, didn’t he!?”

The scarlet Proof visible on his left arm. It was precisely because he saw it that Haring chose to run faster than anyone. He knew the rumors about this dungeon.

“The reason even Adamant Duelists don’t try going to the very bottom of this place...is ’cuz no matter what happens, they don’t wanna have a run-in with that monster!”

An entity even highly-skilled duelists detested the thought of locking blades with. The monster who walked the dungeon’s depths.

“That thing there is the God of Destruction, Wallis Grigor...a bloody crazy angel who holes up at the bottom, going around killin’ beast and duelist alike, and—” Hesitant as he was, Haring spelled out a painful truth, “He’s Orichalcum Rank...he’s in the top ten.”



Haring’s quick judgment had allowed them to successfully escape from the Destruction God Wallis. However, they were still in quite a predicament.

“Tsk... The *return to city* feature’s busted...”

After undoing his Dragonification and fiddling with his Proof, Haring kicked the ground in irritation. Yuri also tried to activate the teleport feature, but the screen didn’t display anything at all.

“No good here... How about you, Ms. Eleanor?”

“Gnn...no good...”

Eleanor’s ears slumped, a dark shadow across her face.

“Goddammit... Not only were we blasted off to who knows where, it just had to be with the Destruction God... No matter how you slice it, this just ain’t right!”

With no other outlet, Haring smacked the trunk of a large nearby tree to let off his anger.

“But he’s a duelist too, isn’t he? Then if we talk it out—”

“Hah!? You wanna have a chat with that monster!? I don’t think you’ll get anythin’ outta the sorta madman who fires off his Divine Might the moment he sees us.”

To initiate an attack before a duel began was unbecoming of a Duelist. No matter how one was swept away by emotion, no matter the circumstance, all matters were to be resolved through dueling.

And yet the actions of Destruction God Wallis seemed to run contrary to that.

“He’s a battle-crazed lunatic who attacks with no distinction between wild beast and duelist. He’s killed more than a duelist or two in his time.”

“If he’s that dangerous, shouldn’t the city have done something about him?”

“Yeah, I wish.” Haring spoke of Wallis with a loathsome look on his face. “The survivors have gone directly to HQ to demand some action, but...as a result of a discussion among the Administrators, it was deemed inappropriate to penalize him.”

“He’s killed people, and it still didn’t work out?”

“Well, for starters, events in the dungeons are technically out of city bounds,

but the thing is, he always properly flashes his Proof before he attacks. He clearly shows his will to hold a duel, then it's the victims who run away...so Wallis's actions have been written off as 'excessive provocations.'"

So said Haring, but it was hard to believe the attack that man had unleashed had been merely a means to rile them up. He had gone so far as to use the Angel Tribe's Tribe Skill Divine Might. He had undoubtedly swung with ill intent.

"For argument's sake, he can now only enter the duel city with the supervision of a city-sanctioned guardian, and he receives periodic audits. He has gotten some restrictions, but...if he never leaves the dungeon to begin with, the constraints don't mean shit."

"Then how does he maintain his ranking?"

"He can still maintain his rate. I mean...his turf is the dungeon's bottom levels. The rate gained from monsters goes up the further in you go."

The monsters they had slain along the way barely gave anything. But the rate earned from a monster corresponded with its strength. While the ones around the entrance could net one to five points, that number had increased to close to a hundred on the floor just before this one.

If he kept hunting around the lowest level, it would be possible to earn a considerable amount of rate.

"And that guy hunts without rest, night and day. He goes up against the sort of monsters other duelists have to join hands to defeat, and he kills a ridiculous number of them alone... That's how he keeps his seat as an Orichalcum Rank Duelist."

"But duelists have a five-duels-per-month quota to fill. If he stays in the dungeon, and everyone avoids him, there's no way he can fulfill it, right?"

"Hell if I know. Maybe people challenge him to see if he's all he's cracked up to be, and rumor has it he duels other Orichalcum regularly. Ask him if you want, but I doubt he'll hold a proper conversation."

Leaning his back against the tree, Haring let out a terribly deep sigh.

"More importantly...the problem is how we're supposed to return to Babel."

With a side glance at his malfunctioning Proof, Haring began putting the situation in order.

“If the return function ain’t workin’, we can’t get away from Wallis right now. The only thing comin’ to mind is the warp we used to get here from the previous floor...”

“Err, can’t just run around until bad man goes away?”

Eleanor timidly raised her hand, but Haring immediately shook his head.

“Can’t. The dungeon warps change every seven days. If we enter the gate after that, it’s possible we’ll end up right before the bottom...I’m assumin’ floor ninety-nine. If something’s malfunctionin’, now’s our last chance to get back to floor forty-nine.”

Four days had gone by since Yuri entered the dungeon. They had three days left to return to where they were before.

“I don’t even know if this busted Proof can still move us between floors, but at this rate, we’ll have to run not just from that monster but from the wild monsters that live in these parts, too. Long story short, it’s all gone to hell.”

As they were now, it would be quite difficult just to take on the wildlife on the bottom floor. It was nearly impossible to even consider taking on Wallis, who could slay those monsters on his own. Should they run for their lives, they would have to make their escape within three days.

“Let’s try fighting Mr. Wallace.”

The moment Yuri said this, Haring’s eyes opened wide.

“Are you stupid!? You wanna go and get killed!?”

“It will be fine. He changed his Proof to duel mode the moment he saw us. That means he has the will to duel, and if we challenge him, we should be sent off to the Field.”

“Tsk... So what if you can duel him? You think you can win?”

“No, I can’t. At the moment, I have no way of winning.”

The air Wallis wore was so peculiar even Yuri could say that with certainty. He

had a presence to him, the overwhelming air of strength that would not permit one to so much as think of fighting and winning. Not that Yuri wanted to accept it.

“The thing is—no matter who my opponent is, I get the desire to beat them.” He quietly spoke his mind. By the time he realized it, he had already lifted the corners of his lips. “If I aim to be the strongest, I’ll eventually have to defeat people like him. That’s why I can’t pull back, and I want to give it my all.”

He couldn’t stop laughing when there was such a strong foe before his eyes. He couldn’t consider running away.

“Because I like fighting strong people—even more than Mr. Wallis.”

Haring didn’t know what to say, seeing Yuri say that with such childish glee. He and Eleanor had fought in a far greater number of duels and had a far greater understanding of the strength of one with an Orichalcum Proof.

None of that mattered to Yuri. The stronger his opponent was—the more his blood throbbed. The blood flowing through his veins cried out, demanding war.

“When the duel begins, we’ll be transferred to the field. Once that happens, the two of you can get through without danger, and safely return to the transfer gate.”

“B-But what happens to Yuri!?”

Eleanor’s brow dropped in concern, while Haring’s furrowed into a deep wrinkle as he shook his head.

“...Won’t cut it. Sure, we might get out safe and sound, but there’s no guaranteein’ your safety.”

“I’ll be just fine! Dying in battle is my lifelong ambition!”

“Shut up, don’t kill yourself off like that. I accepted a request to get you back in one piece. If I use you as bait and run, those idiots will—” Haring suddenly cut himself off. He put a hand to his chin and thought for a second. “...Weeb elf, are you good at outrunning monsters?”

“Running, hiding, essence of ninja! Thinking needed against duelist, but with beasts, won’t be caught no matter what!”

She must have been considerably confident, answering with such vigor. Hearing that...Haring smiled.

“Oi, brat, you wanna win against Wallis?”

“Of course, I want to win!”

“Then you’re gonna lose.”

“Eh? Umm...what do you mean?” Yuri quizzically replied, and Haring’s smile widened menacingly.

“I’m talkin’ about losin’ the duel, but winnin’ the battle. You don’t lose your nerve against Wallis, so you’re the only one who can buy time. The elf can run away from any number of monsters. And I’m knowledgeable about all the monsters in these parts.”

Haring turned to face the two of them.

“The three of us—we’re going to knock some sense into that bastard.”



After getting a general outline from Haring, the three of them headed to their stations. Yuri’s position...was where they first disembarked on that floor. A cliff half-destroyed by Wallis’s might.

“Hmm...that was pretty rough.”

It was quite a long climb to the summit, and Yuri had to wipe a substantial amount of sweat from his brow.

Wallis was nowhere to be seen, and yet...his peculiar air remained strong, as if his aura seized hold of everything within the dungeon’s walls.

According to Haring, Wallis hadn’t lost his intelligence or rationality. The fact that he recognized them as duelists and changed the mode of his Proof made that clear. For that reason, there was a high chance he was lurking around the gate, knowing there was a possibility they would use it to run.

“...Jumping in right now would be pretty easy...”

A little further down, a pale, incandescent swirl hovered, suspended in the air. For this moment alone, Yuri would be able to jump into the gate.

But then the other two wouldn't be able to get away. More than anything—

“To run with my back turned is an embarrassment for a duelist!” He psyched himself up and took in a deep breath before he wrung out as much power as he could, and screamed Wallis's name.

“Mister Wallis!! Come out and play!!”

Soon after came a sound like a whip through the air.

“...Voice, voice, name, calling my name.”

A presence so thick it made the air hard to breathe.

“Calling my name...a duelist.”

And...with a flap of his rotting wings, the God of Destruction, Wallis, descended before his eyes. Thanks to the iron mask, it was impossible to see his expression, but Yuri understood what he felt all too well.

“Yes! I'm a duelist, and my name is Yuri Eniastar!” He drew his black sword with a smile and faced the overwhelming strength before him. “I challenge you to a duel!”

The instant he raised his green Proof, a rush of static noise flashed across his field of vision. The surrounding scenery faded to shades of sepia as he was transported to a world set in a separate phase.

The change came to Wallis shortly after.

“Duel, duel, the conflict I seek...” As he gripped his twin spears, the bulging muscles of both his arms swelled as if to burst. “...To fight...the strong who dare challenge me!”

His fighting spirit soared, and he swung a spear backed by monstrous brute strength, but— “Way too slow,” Yuri muttered to himself, dashing into Wallis's midst. He was used to fighting opponents larger than himself.

Yuri was small, even by human standards, and it was absurd to claim he had a good physique. That was precisely what let him move with an advantage against larger builds. He was small enough to completely hide in an enemy's blind spot, there were no movements restricted from him by excess muscle, and it took less time to return a swung weapon to stance. Those factors allowed

him to somewhat overcome a weight disadvantage. They were skills he fostered before coming to the city, and now he had what he didn't have before: the experience of fighting the truly strong. No matter how strong his opponent was, he could press forward without faltering.

"Mr. Elias was a lot faster than that!" Yuri used the force of his leap to thrust a knee into the giant's wide-open solar plexus.

Unfortunately...

"Might of the Sacred Tree Meliades."

He didn't feel the right sort of impact from his knee.

One of the spears Wallis had been gripping only a moment ago had changed shape into a massive, round shield.

"Push."

With that short utterance, the shield smashed Yuri's diminutive frame into the hard ground.

"Ts—ah!!"

He felt his body crushed to pieces, felt the intense pain of his internal organs rupturing, stealing his consciousness away. But seeing Wallis raise the shield high for another blow, he grit his teeth.

"...Lunar Cycle!"

He wrung out a voice to snap himself back and quickly restored the wounds across his body. He rolled along the ground before he could feel any relief from the pain.

The shield came down where he had been a moment before, the impact forming a circular crater and kicking up the pulverized rock into a cloud of dust.

"Tss... Power-wise, you're quite a bit over Mr. Elias...!!"

Taking more distance, Yuri whipped his quivering legs back into shape. But Wallis remained there, unmoving, still in the same pose from when he smashed down his shield.

"...Shield, shield. So long since I used the shield."

He stared at the shield in his right hand, muttering to the world at large, like the ravings of a madman.

“Nay, you stand before me...not as the strong. You are a weakling who will never land a strike upon me.”

Wallis slowly stood—a terrible chill raced down Yuri’s spine.

“But...you are a weakling who does not fear...does not fall.”

His voice had changed; it was no longer an unorganized ramble. This was the voice of a man who had found exultation in the fight.

“You are...the strong that I seek!”

Wallis was definitely smiling behind his mask.

“I thirst... I hunger... Show me... Show me, a glimpse of true strength...!!”

The spear in his left hand glowed with a furious light. The same red flash that had, in one swing, collapsed a magnificent cliff.

“Spear of the Morning Star!!”

The next instant, Yuri’s sight was covered in red. The immense torrent of energy flooding out of Wallis’s weapon... Death would be unavoidable if he took any attacks head-on.

That was why he needed to create a possibility. Should he do nothing, nothing would change. In order to avoid the absolute death coming for him—
“Hardened Hoof!”

Yuri unleashed his right arm at the light. He scraped together a stream of power within and released all he could muster.

His body burned up. He could feel the haunting sensation as the life within him seeped away—and in the midst of it, the red light filling up his eyes was finally fended off.

“...Looks like everything’s worth a go.”

White smoke rising from all over his body, Yuri’s mouth curled into a smile. His right hand still maintained its original shape. The skin was torn away here and there where he had taken the light, but his bones weren’t broken.

Technique alone wasn't enough to stifle the recoil of Hardened Hoof. Learning from the stones he hit away at, Yuri had used his own mana to disperse the impact and let it escape outside his body.

"Look...I didn't fall, Mr. Wallis."

He continued to point his thrust-out fist at the man before his eyes.

"If you want to take me down...you'll have to get serious!" Yuri proudly declared.

Wallis responded by plunging the point of his spear into the ground.

"Good, good. Goodgoodgoodgoodgood. How long since any besides my friend haven't fallen!"

When he threw aside his round shield, another large spear generated in his hand.

"All that lies at the end of strife...take it upon yourself and perish..."

Wallis's fighting spirit spread out to the high heavens, distorting the air around him.

But Yuri had nothing left. He had largely depleted the mana in his body to erase the recoil of Tribal Armament. Blocking that blow had left him running on fumes, and by this point, he couldn't even heal himself anymore.

Given time, he could recover mana, but Wallis wouldn't give that to him. Yuri couldn't avoid defeat. But he could fulfill his objective.

"Truth be told, I wanted to give it my all against you." Yuri offered his opponent an apologetic laugh. "But this isn't my fight alone. To let the other two get away—"

Yuri lowered his head.

"—I, Yuri Eniastar, forfeit this battle."

His declaration brought color back to the scenery. The rocks and earth crumbled in battle regained their shape upon his return to reality.

The unforeseen conclusion caused Wallis to freeze. He had stopped.

"—Fufu. Mission complete!"

Eleanor's cheerful voice resounded from nowhere in particular, after which a stampede of monsters knocked the large Wallis off his feet.

Large wolves, easily over ten meters from head to tail. And not just one of them; an entire pack of the gargantuan beasts closed in like a wave, chasing the blown-off body of Wallis on his tumble down the cliff.

"On your feet, brat! No dazing out!"

Haring cried out from his spot near the gate, and Yuri turned and ran.

"Everythin' checks out! The warp's workin' fine! Hurry and switch your Proof to dungeon mode!"

"On it! You're here too, right, Ms. Eleanor!?"

"Yep, yep. I back!"

Having climbed back from the edge of the cliff, Eleanor popped her head over the ledge.

Haring had proposed a way to remove Wallis from the picture. Even if the man was a high-ranking duelist, he would still have difficulties going up against multiple monsters. It was impossible to influence the real world from the Field. And that was precisely why Yuri had to duel him.

Making sure he didn't notice Eleanor running around with an attractant, riling up monsters, making sure he couldn't lay a hand on Haring as he inspected the gate, Yuri became bait and lured him into the Field.

"...Umm, he's not dead, is he?"

"Like I care! Considering the stuff he's got up to, even if he does die, he's just reaping what he—!"

Before he could finish, he was cut off by a scream from below. It wasn't the scream of any human. The bitter death throes and howls of beasts overlapped.

"...He really is a monster!!"

"Ohno, ohno... Poor monsters, I so sorry...!!"

As the two hurriedly made off for the gate, Yuri found himself stopping.

"Mr. Wallis! I'll be back to fight you again!"

He threw out his voice to the bottom of the cliff.

“And next time...I’ll win for sure!” Yuri happily informed him, eagerly awaiting his fated battle.



Some time passed after Yuri’s party had left the floor. The pale transfer gate had disappeared along with them, but it wasn’t long before it manifested once more.

“Aah, here we are, here we are. It sure is convenient to have a shortcut to the bottom floor.”

Her languid voice echoing, Mirka gave her black wings a flap as she descended to the mountain road below. She restlessly looked around but found who she was looking for soon enough.

“Hello there... You’re in quite a situation, I see.”

Mirka grimaced upon seeing him sitting before a mountain of mangled beast corpses, the ground around stained red and black. The large man, the artist behind the travesty, was coated in a layer of discolored dark blood.

Finally noticing his visitor, the man slowly lifted his head.

“...A voice, a voice. A voice of a friend.”

“Yes, yes, it’s your friend Mirka,” Mirka called out, her tone no different than usual. But Wallis didn’t move. He didn’t direct hostility toward her as he had with Yuri.



“But man, leave it to Haring to think up some nasty plots. If he weren’t up against you, he would have been strictly punished and banned from the dungeons for that one.”

“Nay, nay. But a trifle. The beasts are not enough to wound me.”

Just as he said, Wallis didn’t harbor a single injury. Having slain beasts that would usually require a moderate-sized team to kill, he did not even feel proud of the accomplishment.

For the Destruction God Wallis Grigor understood this was nothing to be proud of. He understood this was not the battle duelists longed for.

“Truth be told, I wanted to let you fight him to a conclusion. But not only was Haring more enthusiastic than expected, there was an irregular kid with them too, so please don’t be angry.”

“Nay, nay. I feel no anger, it is refreshing.” He spoke on in a muffled voice, “So long...since a battlefield where my heart did dance so. I haven’t felt it with any besides we who stand at the summit, not for a long time now.”

“Mnn, it’s hard to understand with the way you talk, can you keep it simple?”

“Good kid.”

“Oh, that’s simple enough.”

And as she giggled, Wallis quietly muttered to himself.

“He said he would fight me again.” His body quivered as he stared at his hand. “He said he would beat me.”

He clenched his hand hard enough to make a sound, and his shaking ceased.

“I—wish to cross spears with him once more.”

Thanks to the mask covering his face, it was impossible to see his expression. But...there was no doubt he was smiling.

“Good grief, am I not enough for you?”

“Nay, nay. Fighting you is no fight, it is a one-sided massacre.”

“That’s a harsh way to put it. But you are my only friend who goes along with

my little games, so I've brought you a bit of good news," Mirka announced, and operated her own Proof. The screen she brought up was transferred to Wallis's Proof as well.

"Question, question. What is this?"

"It's an invitation to the Babel Roulette."

Seeing Wallis cock his head, Mirka lifted the corners of her lips. "Do you wish to fight him...Yuri Eniastar again?"

"Wish, wish. A battle is what I seek."

"Good reply. In that case, why not come out and play? It's been a long time." Her violet eyes glimmered while her black wings spread wide. "Let's teach the other duelists what it truly means to be the strongest."



Passing through the warp successfully deposited them onto the forty-ninth floor. The party of three immediately collapsed onto the ground.

"Aah... Shit, I seriously can't believe I'm not dead..."

"So scary, being chased by wolves..."

"I wanted to fight Mr. Wallis to a conclusion..."

Each with their own take on the matter, they all offered a unanimous heavy sigh.

"Erk... Lost all ores worked hard to get..."

"Come to think of it, Mr. Wallis did blow them all away... I was supposed to harvest herbs for Mr. Elias, but in the end, I didn't manage to get anything..."

While the transfer gate somehow remained intact, if they chose to return to that incomprehensible floor for their harvest, their efforts would all have been for nothing.

A duet of sighs was followed by a loud thud. Yuri and Eleanor turned to see a large cloth bag placed before them.

"Here, weeb elf. Are these the stones you were looking for?"

“Serious? Thank you?”

“And next up, this is for you, brat. You make sure the herbs are preserved right.”

“Y-Yes, of course! But...Mr. Haring, when did you pull it off?”

“Went around pickin’ them up while you were fightin’. I ain’t gonna let all our life-threatenin’ effort go to waste. Not on my watch.”

Bag after bag rolled out of his storage. Of course, he had taken his share as well.

“I knew you had it in you, Mr. Haring! Your pettiness saved us all!”

“Haring a wonderful looter!”

“I’ll shove your ungrateful asses back into the gate.” Despite his cursing, Haring had been infected by their smiles. “Anyway, that’s one thing off the table. The brat still has time to go, but with things bein’ the way they are, no one can complain if we return now.”

“Eh? We’re going back?”

“Shut it. I’m gettin’ the hell out, and I’m doin’ it now. It was a shady job to begin with; yep, I’m gonna go complain to my client and have her pay in full.”

As Haring stood, Yuri hurriedly grabbed him by the arm. “P-Please wait! Umm—right, take this!” He quickly fiddled with his Proof and transferred a message to Haring’s Proof.

Haring slowly, dubiously took a look at what he’d received. “...Your contact info, and an application to the team?”

“Yes! As long as I send the application, Ms. Mirka told me you can accept or reject it whenever you want!”

“Ah, me too! Give Yuri and Haring contact information!!” Eleanor frantically operated her Proof and transferred her contact info over to the two of them.

However, the matter of the application seemed to still weigh heavily over Haring, and he continued making a bitter expression.

“...I told you, I don’t feel like joinin’ in.”

“But I had a lot of fun with you, you know!” Yuri grinned wide, recalling the moments that had led to this day. “Putting our heads together, having everyone fulfill a given duty was a blast! You’re the one who taught me that, Mr. Haring!” he declared, staring straight at the dragon.

Putting in as much sincerity as he could, Yuri reached out his hand.

“Please, oh please—won’t you fight by our side!?”

He received no response. Haring was left staring at the hand in surprise. And — “...Oh, what’s this now? Is that a familiar face I see?”

They heard a voice, seemingly from nowhere at all. Eventually, a number of men appeared from the shadows of the thicket.

“How long’s it been...Haring?”

Blond hair in a fashionable undercut. A flashy outfit and sunglasses. A Demon Tribe man. The men waiting behind him shared the black bat-like wings of the Demon Tribe growing from their backs.

The sight of these newcomers warped Haring’s already bitter face into a blatant grimace.

“Tsk... Why’d we have to run into this piece of shit here?”

“Hey, hey, heeey! Don’t you think that’s a bit harsh? Yes, piece of shit’s too much. We used to hang out all the time, didn’t we?”

When the demon man’s eyes were about to turn to Yuri, Haring took a step forward. “...This is the brat my client has me lookin’ after. You ain’t layin’ a finger on him.”

“Client? Oh, you always were such a hard worker! Now I remember! I had a right laugh when I saw you so desperate to earn money you fell through the ranks.” On the flashy man’s signal, his tag-alongs burst into tasteless, exaggerated laughter.

The usual Haring would be at their throats, screaming, when anyone sneered at him, but now he was quiet and meek as a whipped dog.

“Well, I suppose that’s none of my business. Just leave that bag behind, and you won’t hear another word out of me. How’s that sound?”

“...What?”

“I’m talking about that sack you have on you. I mean, you’re going to trade it in for money, and where’s that money going to go, eh? Then having me collect it directly should save you some trouble,” he said, pointing at the sack Haring had taken out of his Proof.

He would never usually accept such a request. And yet...Haring was quick to violently toss his sack at the men.

“...They’re from near the bottom of this godforsaken place. You’d better price them right.”

“Wow, looks like someone’s understanding. But—that’s not all, is it?” said the sunglassed man, looking at the bags by Yuri and Eleanor’s feet.

It was there that Haring finally showed some backbone. “The brats collected those on their own. I’ve got no claim on them.”

“What’s that have to do with it? If they’re going around with you, then obviously *that* belongs to me.”

After the man had unveiled such an illogical stream of logic, one of the people behind him grabbed Eleanor’s sack.

“No! What you doing!?”

“Shut yer yap! This belongs to Mr. Navie!” the follower replied—all the while pulling a knife from his bosom. Immediately after, Eleanor let out a short scream. The tip grazed her pale neck, leaving a thin line of red liquid in its wake.

“Hey, hey, heeey...don’t be violent with Haring’s friends, eh? She looks so scared, she’s going to wet herself. How about a little tact?”

“...If you don’t cut that out—”

The moment Haring was about to grab the follower, he was stopped by an ominous snap. This was followed—a second later—by the sound of the knife hitting the ground, and the man who had thrust it out looked down at his hand where the knife was supposed to be. An arm dented in the center, and bent where it shouldn’t be.

The pain struck him as soon as he connected the dots, and he collapsed to the

ground.

“Ee...m-my arm! It’s...it’s...”

“Well, what’s wrong with it?” asked Yuri as he held up his sack, looking down at the flustered man. “I was just trying to hand my bag over... Why, you’re the one who asked for it,” he chuckled, jostling the bag around playfully.

Unrest spread among his men, and the demon in sunglasses calmly looked at Yuri.

“Well aren’t you special... What’s your deal, kid?”

“That’s what I should be asking you. We obtained these materials in the dungeon, so if you want them so badly, shouldn’t we have a duel?”

“A duel...? Now that’s the craziest thing I’ve heard all day.” After raising a laugh that was like sandpaper to the ears, the man held out his left arm. “You mean—you want to fight me? The great and mighty Navie?”

Navie brandished his arm, waving it around as if to taunt him. The Proof that accompanied it was set with the glimmer of a purple gemstone. The same rank as Elias: Adamant.

“Yes, I’m surprised mix-blood trash like you has the sheer gall to blather such nonsense as dueling me. Even Haring over there knows better, eh?”

While Navie laughed hard enough his cheeks were on the verge of tearing, Yuri felt something clasp his shoulder.

“...Give it a rest, brat. Unlike the Beheader, this guy doesn’t fight fair,” Haring quietly warned him, looking him straight in the eye.

But Yuri returned a wry smile, brushing off Haring’s hand.

“I suppose you’re right. He definitely doesn’t look like the decent sort, but...”

Yuri reached out and grabbed Navie’s left arm. He glared at the man, putting power into his grip.

“From what I’ve heard so far, I find you extremely unpleasant. It isn’t just your attitude, I can’t forgive that you’ve wounded Ms. Eleanor. The way you look down on Mr. Haring is rather irritating.”

As he clenched harder, a creaking, jarring sound began to come from the arm.

“Pull a weapon, and we won’t be joking and jeering no more... That’s what Mr. Haring taught me. What I’m trying to say is, if you want to fight, get to it already—Mr. Piece of Shit.”

Yuri glared at Navie, making no attempts to conceal his rage. All the while, Navie kept a calm watch over him. Eventually, he forcefully swung off Yuri’s hand.

“I see...the rumors were true. He really is an interesting kid.” Navie spat the words before turning on his heels. “Hey, you lot, I’ve lost interest. We’re leaving.”

“S-Sure...but, we’ll need to carry—”

Right after one of his tag-alongs pointed out the man with the broken arm, the fallen man’s face was covered in pitch blackness. As he was shrouded with a darkness that seemed to wriggle like a living being, he began to thrash and writhe, without a sound escaping his mouth.

“I said we’re leaving... That means no more fooling around.”

The man on the ground was now violently convulsing, but the darkness covering his face showed no signs of fading away. Finally, when he had soiled himself and his body had stopped moving entirely...the void dissipated, swirling up in the direction of Navie’s hand.

“You fool! You got done in by a pipsqueak! Someone carry off that idiot!”

“Eeep! Y-Yes sir!” In accordance with Navie’s order, the unconscious man was lifted, taking care to guard his broken arm.

Before they left, Navie flashed his red tongue as he turned.

“I’ll have a fun game planned for you, mix-blood.”

At the end of his words, Navie and his men were enveloped in a pale light. Once they were completely gone, Yuri picked up the sack that had been left on the ground.

“Here, Mr. Haring. It’s your share.”

“...Tsk, don’t need it. You keep it.”

“I won’t. Please take it.” He continued obstinately thrusting the bag out at Haring. “This is the proof of our efforts, and a precious reminder of the time the three of us spent together. That’s why you’re the only person who can take this bag.”

Haring gave in, slowly reaching out toward the bag.

Once he confirmed that Haring had received it, Yuri turned to Eleanor, who was crouched on the floor. “Are you alright, Ms. Eleanor?”

“Yes! I perfectly fine!”

“But there was blood coming from—”

After saying that, Yuri realized something was off. There was no wound where the tip of the knife had grazed her.

Eleanor proudly puffed her chest. “Fufu—this is secret ninja art, startle enemy with fake blood technique!”

“You mean you were acting!?”

“Use blood bag to startle enemy, and in moment of surprise, cut them straight in two!”

“No, we’re the ones who were startled here!”

In the midst of that exchange—Yuri suddenly heard a laugh. He glanced to see Haring covering his face, his body shaking.

“Good grief...guess I’m the idiot for gettin’ all worked up,” Haring said, and lightly patted the two of them on the head. “I’m returnin’. There’s a chance they set up an ambush in the purgatory district to settle the score, so you two wait a bit before goin’ back.”

After operating his Proof, his body was clad in a pale light.

“Thank you, Brat.”

And, with such waning words, Haring was gone.



When Yuri and Eleanor returned to the purgatory district, the duel city was already dyed in the shades of sunset. They could see duelists presumably returning from the dungeons around, bragging about the day's harvests and telling tall tales of fighting off all manner of beasts.

"Really! Really, thank you, thank you!" Once again, Eleanor lowered her head. "Thanks to Yuri and Haring, Tenebre not have to angry!"

Before parting, Eleanor hugged him and ruffled up his hair. "Was fun, so fun want to go to dungeon again, the three of us! Next time, can take my comrades too!!" She smiled wide and left to return to her team.

Yuri saw her off before racing down the duel city streets that already felt so nostalgic to him. He reached the apartment where the other two were waiting and threw open the door.

"I'm back!"

He heard frantic footsteps from the depths of the room.

"Y-Yuri! You're back early!"

"Yes, there was a slight change of plans... Wait, Fram, what are you doing?"

Though she was usually composed and subdued, Fram was in a rare fidgety panic.

"Big trouble! Because of you, Athena's in a huge—"

"C-Calm down! What's wrong with Athena?"

"She's kinda about to drop dead, seriously!"

"Seriously, what happened!?"

Yuri raced after Fram into the living room—and there, he came upon a silver ball of fluff. A perfectly round hairball was enshrined smack dab in the middle of the room.

"...Umm, this is Athena, right?"

"Right... I thought it was a little strange yesterday when she started muttering, 'Yuri isn't here today... Yuri hasn't come back...' with empty eyes, but when I got back from work, she was in this state!"

“You probably should have been concerned yesterday!”

Stepping past a shook-up Fram, Yuri approached the silver furball. “Err... Athena?”

The shaggy sphere shook. “Yuri... Why do I hear Yuri’s voice...”

“That’s, well, because I’m speaking?”

“Waaah... I’m finally starting to hallucinate...!!”

“I’m not a delusion! Hey, how about you move your tail and see!?”

When he brushed aside her scraggly tail, he was met by Athena’s lifeless face. She slowly turned towards him, and the moment he was fully in her sight, the light returned to her eyes.

“Yaaaaaay! It’s Yuri, it’s Yuri!!”

“Whoah!? Wait, I haven’t unloaded my things yet!”

Fram let out a sigh loaded with ample fatigue. “...Is it just me, or is she gradually going from fox to dog...?”

Athena had already cast aside her deep rut, and she readily jumped at Yuri like her life depended on it.

“But why is Yuri here?”

“It’s a long story, but quite a few things happened, and I had to come back early...”

“Well, s’long as you’re back, who cares!”

“You recovered incredibly fast!”

“I can ask why you’re back later! There’s something more important now!”

Making a bit of distance from Yuri, Athena stuck out her finger. “Yuri, you smell funny...” she declared.

“Fram, I think I’m going to cry.”

Fram approached his neck, and took a good sniff. “If you need a chest to cry on, feel free to use mine. But...you definitely do smell a bit. And you’re pretty dirty.”

But this was as to be expected; Yuri had devoted all his time save for sleeping and eating to advancing in the dungeon. There were rivers along the way, but he only used them to replenish his water supply and never to wash.

“Athena, prepare the bath.”

“Roger!”

“Eh? But I need to deliver the herbs to Mr. Elias—”

“He’s running an eating establishment there. I’m sure you’ll make him angry if you go as you are now. Don’t forget, you returned before the assigned day, so there’s no problem if you take your time.”

With Fram pushing him on the back, he was ultimately shoved into the bathroom.

Once the bath was prepared...

“Aight, your Big Sis is going to make you squeaky clean!”

“Yes. Just leave it to her.”

“...Umm, why are the two of you still here?”

Seeing the two girls stick around as if this was where they were supposed to be, Yuri didn’t quite know what to say.

“You just got back from the dungeon, I need to look over your injuries. You seem like the type who would just ignore minor wounds, and I get the feeling you’d keep them hidden.”

“I just want to wash Yuri!”

“I kinda understand the reason, but...” Still in his undergarments, Yuri awkwardly curled up.

They had both changed into clothes they were fine with getting wet: Athena in the tank top and shorts she used as pajamas, and Fram in a light camisole.

Given how they essentially lived together, he had plenty of opportunities to see them like this, but when put up close, he was troubled as to where to rest his eyes.

“I-I really do think I should wash myself!”

“If you reject her here, Athena will become the furball freak again.”

“Is that supposed to be a threat...!?”

“Of course it is... Athena was feeling lonely, not being able to see you. Just let her do what she wants today,” Fram whispered, pointing at the girl behind them who was humming a merry tune as she readied a sponge with soap. Athena’s tail was wagging with such overwhelming fervor it looked as if it would snap in two.

“Are you so heartless, you’d make a fluffball of her after seeing her like that?”

“.....Fine, I’ll let her wash me.”

“Good boy. I’m glad you’re so kind.”

He felt like he was being cheated as Fram patted him on the head.

Soon, Athena returned to rub a sudsy sponge against his back. “There we go... Are you okay, Yuri? Does it hurt?”

“Oh, no, you’re putting in just the right amount of force. It feels nice.”

“...You’ve gotten yourself quite injured again. Your right hand is in tatters.”

“Err... Yes, I’m sorry.”

As Athena stuck fast to him, washing his back, Fram crouched down beside him, prodding her small fingers at his wounds. How very unsettling.

“C-Come to think of it, all sorts of things happened in the dungeon!”

Yuri began telling a story to distract himself. About how he met a somewhat bizarre elf girl named Eleanor. About how Haring was surprisingly knowledgeable. How he learned about Dragonification, and thought up a possible new application for his Tribal Armament. How the three of them stood against the Orichalcum Rank Wallis together.

It had only been a few days, but once he started talking, he felt he could go on forever.

“Hey, Yuri...when you were in the dungeon...did you have fun?” Athena abruptly asked as he was delightedly talking away. She seemed somewhat

different from normal, taking him momentarily by surprise, but— “Yes! It was really fun!”

So much had happened the past few days, and it had all been a blast. Not only did he get to know Haring better, he made a new friend in Eleanor and learned the fun of fighting alongside other people. Sure, there was danger, and a somewhat unpleasant conclusion...but he had spent more than enough fulfilling time to compensate.

“I see. So he...did keep his promise.” Athena offered a soft smile.

“...Athena?”

“Mnnn, it’s nothing. Big Sis was just relieved,” she said, embracing Yuri’s head. After which...she violently rubbed his hair all around. “But. You. Know! I was really really lonely, you hear!”

“Wah, wai—!? Soap!? There’s soap in my eyes!”

“Ah, what are you doing, Athena... You got me covered in suds too.”

Thanks to Athena’s forceful scrubbing, Fram was caught in the aftermath and covered in a thick layer of soapy foam.

“If I get out to change, I’ll end up staining the room.”

“Righty-ho, then let’s just get in the bath like this!”

Right before Athena could slip off her tank top, Yuri frantically held her back. “Please wait! I’m still here, you know!”

“Huh? I don’t really mind,” said Athena.

“Then I’ll pretend not to care too,” Fram concurred.

“Why are you playing along with her crazy antics?”

“Because it’s fun to see how you react.”

Yuri reflexively closed his eyes as the two of them stripped off what little clothes they had on. And in the end, the three of them ended up in the bath together.

“Hwah... Nice and warm.”

“Yuri, how long are you going to keep your eyes shut?”

“Probably until the two of you are out...”

“Say what!? You hate being with Big Sis that much!?”

“Athena, you definitely can’t hug me right now!”



“I’ll say this for your sake, Yuri, but both me and Athena are incredibly soft.”

“What sort of information is that!? Hey, wait. I feel something strange on my back—”

“Oh, that’s my tail.”

“I was wondering what was slopping around like that!”

“Dear, dear, what’s poor Yuri to do?”

As the two of them made a ruckus splashing around, Fram hummed a spirited tune.

But Yuri loved these boisterous, fun days. He would never have been able to take in these spectacles if he hadn’t set out to be a duelist. He would never have been able to enter the circle.

It wasn’t just Athena and Fram. Yuri was proud to meet, fight, and live alongside every duelist in this city. There was not a moment he regretted. That is—until the next day, when he heard Haring had been arrested.

Chapter 4

The details of the incident were spelled out on the city bulletin.

“Hey, you hear about Haring?”

“That big-headed, pissed off troublesome dragon? What about him?”

“I hear he was taken in at town hall.”

“Well that’s nothing new. Duelists get dragged in for scuffles every day, and this is Haring we’re talking about.”

“I was there when it happened, and it wasn’t like that. An army of Babel staff members surrounded him, and Haring was kicking and screaming, making a whole lotta noise.”

“Was it really Babel staff? Not those duelists on public safety duty? Then it must be quite an incident.”

“What’s so special about staff getting involved? Someone tell me?”

“It means it’s on the same level as that slave incident a year ago.”

“That time those newbies were forced to obey with contracts? According to the victims, there were still other kids trapped, but was that ever taken care of?”

“Nope, still missing. Navie Ionesca’s the main suspect, but I’m pretty sure he got off due to lack of evidence. They haven’t found the other victims yet.”

“I mean, Navie’s totally guilty. He’s got up to all sorts of things behind the scenes.”

“Wait, wasn’t Haring also arrested as a suspect back then?”

“If I’m remembering right, someone witnessed Haring with the victim, and he was reported and arrested. There wasn’t any evidence against Haring, though, so he was released.”

“Hey, management, you listening? We have victims here, how about you try a bit harder?”

"I hear Navie makes sure his underlings do everything so he never gets his hands dirty. His underlings are under contract that prevent them from doing anything disadvantageous to him. Quoting what another guy said, 'If management starts getting involved with contractual duels, it'll create an exception in the sole rule that 'everything must be resolved with duels,' and they'll have hell to pay for that. They can't make any large moves without definite evidence.'"

"Wait, you think Haring was arrested for the slave incident again?"

"Nah, my friend heard what they were saying. Seems Haring got violent in the dungeon outside of a duel and forcefully stole all of someone's materials. By the way, the guy filing the claim works under Navie."

"Oh, got it. Haring pissed off The Tormentor. Well, that's just dumb."

"Can't really sympathize with him on this one. It's true he used to hang around Navie, and he's the sorta guy who does anything for money. This is where it all led him."

"He's caused loads of problems already, so his punishment will be pretty heavy this time, right?"

"At the very least, it won't be another slap on the wrist."

"I'm betting on his Proof being confiscated, and him being exiled."



Yuri rushed into Babel Tower the moment he read the news.

"What is the meaning of this! Ms. Mirka!?" Yuri closed in with such force he quite nearly slid over the counter.

But Mirka calmly shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I cannot provide any details regarding Haring. The situation is still under investigation, so please wait for an official announcement on the—"

"That's not what I'm asking about!"

"You can't, Yuri! Calm down a bit!" Seeing Yuri about to punch the desk, Athena hurriedly held back his body.

“First, let’s confirm something. Is it true Haring was arrested?” Fram, who had tagged along, nonchalantly asked.

“Yes, that’s true. Haring was taken in under certain suspicions.”

“I see... Then, if we say we can offer information, will you contextualize it?”

Mirka reacted ever so slightly. “What sort of information would that be?”

“Information from someone who was at the scene of the crime.”

“Hmm...very well. This might not be the place to talk.”

Mirka left the front desk counter and headed further into the tower. When she brushed her hand against a seamless wall, a portion of it opened like a door.

A simple room with nothing more than a table and chairs. Mirka arranged enough chairs for everyone before touching her staff Proof.

“Now then, now then, this conversation won’t leave this room. But it will be recorded, and do keep in mind that providing false testimony is a crime and will be—”

“Yes, enough of the pleasantries. You’re not even recording, are you?” Fram cut in.

“Oh, you got me? Well, I just thought I’d better hear you out first.” Mirka turned back to Yuri’s stiff face. “This time, Haring is suspected of not only inflicting heavy injury, but also theft of highly valuable materials. Do you have any information about that?”

“Yes... I mean, I’m the one who actually did that.”

“...I see. Would you care to explain?”

“When me, Mr. Haring, and an Elf Tribe girl called Eleanor returned to the forty-ninth floor...we ran into a person called Mr. Navie, who was leading around a lot of Demon Tribe people. He demanded that Mr. Haring hand over everything he’d collected, and then told us to do the same.”

“I see, I see. Then what happened?”

“When Haring refused their requests, one of the men thrust a knife at

Eleanor's throat. I suddenly thought I had to save her, so I broke the guy's arm."

Yuri indifferently spoke on while Mirka quietly lent an ear. He still remembered it vividly enough; it had only happened a day ago.

"And I returned the nearly-stolen materials to Mr. Haring. That's the truth."

"...I see. To be perfectly honest, I can't praise you for what you've done, but the other party made an unreasonable demand, and considering that an acquaintance was exposed to danger, I can write it off as inevitable, and send you home with a warning."

"Then—"

"But the one being charged right now is Haring," Mirka replied, before going into the circumstances. "Even if that is true, the one under suspicion is Haring. There's no evidence or witnesses to say that you're the one who injured him."

"If you need a witness, Ms. Eleanor was with us."

"Her case is no different from yours. What's important is to find a third-party witness with no relation to either side. Without that, it just becomes a he-said, she-said argument."

As far as he could remember, they were the only ones there. It was possible there was someone else where he couldn't see, but it was dubious whether or not they could confirm that Yuri was the one who landed the blow.

"But the biggest problem here...is that Haring is pleading guilty."

"Guilty... What do you mean?"

"You should ask him that. I'm overstepping my authority here, so you better not tell anyone, okay?"

Mirka placed a gag order before operating her Proof. Once she was finished, a portion of the wall behind her swung open without a sound.

A prison to keep duelists who had committed a crime. The dreary room separated off by a pane of glass had no windows and was equipped with only the minimum necessary light for human function. And inside it was a lone figure... Haring sat, slouched against the wall.

“Haring—Mr. Haring!” Yuri called out, causing Haring to slightly lift his head.

“It’s you, brat... What are you here for?”

“I’m here because I know you’re innocent! I was the one who hurt someone, so there’s no reason for you to be punished for it!”

He frantically called, but Haring’s reaction wasn’t too optimistic. He simply, powerlessly, continued to hang his head.

“I don’t really care. A guy like me was bound to be caught and thrown out sooner or later. Just so happens the time is now.”

“Why...why are you giving up!? It’s still possible. If there was just one more witness, we could prove I did it, and have the—”

“It ain’t that simple,” Haring interrupted, looking up at Yuri again. “Even if you do find a witness...that witness will be the piece of shit’s next target. He’ll hold a duel where no one’s lookin’, and once they’re dead, unable to move, he’ll have his underlings torment them however they like... He’s the kinda guy who can do that without battin’ an eye.”

“No way... Why is Mr. Navie going so far to—” After saying that much, Yuri realized. “He’s after me, isn’t he?”

Haring didn’t answer. Back then, Yuri had stuck up for Haring and insulted Navie. To Yuri, Haring was an important friend, after all. That was precisely why Navie had set his crosshairs on Haring.

If Haring continued to plead guilty, Yuri would lose a friend. He would be stricken by the powerless, helpless feeling of being unable to protect him. Even if Yuri did manage to find a witness to clear up Haring’s charges, Yuri himself would bear the punishment for committing violence before a duel, and that fact would enter public knowledge. With his newfound notoriety, Yuri would have a much harder time gathering members for the Babel Roulette, and a great many would turn him a cold shoulder.

No matter what he did, Yuri would suffer a devastating blow.

“This is for the best. I leave the city, and you walk off like nothing happened.” While he clearly understood it was wrong, Haring accepted his guilt. He had

done this...to protect Yuri.

“Hey, I’m a villain. I always act like crap; when I get ticked, I yell and think about hittin’ people. Hell, I’m the sorta guy who’ll do anythin’ for money. No one cares if someone like that goes away, and you don’t have to care either.”

“...You’re not that sort of person, Mr. Haring.” Yuri clenched his fist, squeezing out his words. “You’re definitely foul-mouthed, quick to anger, and always in a bad mood...but you—”

“Listen to me, Yuri.”

Haring finally said his name. Yuri slowly lifted his head. And there, he saw—the smile on Haring’s face.

“I just became a duelist for the money. Didn’t have a single goal in my head. But...you have somewhere you have to go. Right?” Unlike usual, he spoke to Yuri in a remonstrative tone. “The guy who’s gonna be the strongest duelist...ain’t gonna stop here.”

He smiled as he cast his words. The first carefree smile Haring had ever shown him.

Upon seeing it...Yuri couldn’t help but smile himself. “I knew it, you really aren’t a bad guy, Mr. Haring.”

Surely he wasn’t wrong. The duelist called Haring was precisely the sort of person Yuri knew he was.

“A true villain would never smile like that.”

Yuri turned to leave.

“Athena, Fram. I’m going to search for a witness. Please help me.”

“Got it. Elias might know something about the duelist who framed you, so that should be a good place to start.”

While Yuri and Fram exchanged words and left the room, Athena stopped and turned.

“Hey, Haring...you kept quiet the last time too.”

Athena cast her question through the glass. Just like when they met in the

dungeon, her turquoise eyes were straightforward and clear.

“Could it be—you were trying to...”

A girl bound by contract being dragged around by Haring. The girl...was found near Babel Tower. Then how did the girl get that far?

Bound by the fear of death, her legs cowering... Why had she made her resolve to run? How was she able to slip past all the watchful eyes?

Haring answered these questions, his head parallel to the ground.

“...It’s an undeniable fact I took money from that bloody Navie to keep an eye on the kids.” But Haring went on. “So thanks for saving her back then—you stupid fox.”

Those words were enough to send Athena out of the room, sprinting after the other two.



The jail had fallen silent. However, the sealed wall was still left open.

“...Oi, close the wall, receptionist lady.”

“Yes, I am a receptionist, and I am a lady, but it’s high time you start using my name.”

“I don’t remember your damn name.”

“Oh come on. I’m certain I introduced myself in the last interrogation.”

Mirka sat in the chair, slowly spinning round and round. She and Haring had definitely met before. During the slave incident...the one who interrogated him as a suspect was Mirka. The one who released him was also Mirka.

“I can imagine why you didn’t say anything. You worked under that Navie, so I’m sure you understood that speaking would be completely pointless.”

The chair came to a sudden stop. She directed a mysterious smile at him.

And she was right.

While the testimony of the rescued girl did cast suspicions upon Navie Ionesca, not a shred of evidence could be found linking him to the incident.

Haring knew it would happen, therefore he kept his silence. Otherwise—he wouldn't be able to keep his promise.

“Athena is sharper than she looks, god bless her soul. If you were going to hint that hard, you could have just given her a real answer.”

He replied to Mirka's question with a scoff at himself. “Hah... I'm gonna leave the city anyways. What's talkin' gonna do for me?”

Even so, Mirka continued to latch on. “Let me change the question. Why do you try to make people hate you?”

Even if she asked that, he didn't really have an answer. If he had to say...

“Is it because the people around you desire you to be evil?”

Taken by surprise, Haring inadvertently lifted his head.

“I mean, the word ‘Haring’ does mean ‘nuisance’ in ancient dragonic.”

“...Why do you know somethin' like that?”

Haring's village was in a remote region where they still used old customs and words to this day. It was in that village where he earned the name “Haring.”

“I have an acquaintance who's pretty knowledgeable about the Dragon Tribe, you see. During our last investigation, I asked him a few things about you.”

Her purple eyes pierced through him, as if she had seen through every last defense he put up. Perhaps it was because of those eyes that Haring somehow or another felt like talking about himself.

“...I was an orphan. Lost my parents in the pandemic.”

Haring's parents were gone by the time he got to thinking about the world. His village was on a desolate mountain, what little fertile land they had run dry by many generations of farming. This left the village as a whole in a constant state of poverty. But the villagers did not wish to leave the lands where their families had lived since ancient days. No matter how needy they were, they would live on if only to preserve their traditions.

Naturally, they hadn't the surplus to raise an orphan, but Haring was taken in as a baby by someone who knew his parents well. He still had a different name

then, as far as he could recall. But...as he grew, the name was quickly lost to the sands of time.

“I’ve had a good physique since I was a little tyke. Ate twice as much as the others, and threw a tantrum when there was no food. The villagers couldn’t stand me.”

And at some point, the villagers began calling him nuisance and baring their antipathy. The adults looked at him coldly; the kids his age would call him Haring to make him mad. Short-tempered as he was, he would smack the children to the ground, and it had gotten to the point where even his guardian who took him in would keep him at arm’s length.

“But...it didn’t really bother me. Call me a nuisance if you want, but that was my place in the world. What more could I ask for?”

By shunning Haring and using him as an outlet for their pent-up emotions, the villagers maintained their vigor. While he understood it was twisted, Haring accepted the role. To be detested by others was where he found worth in existing. Precisely because it was a closed-off village, they needed somewhere, someone to direct their anger toward when irrationality and unreasonability struck. Young as he was, even Haring could understand that.

And thus, he gave up on being a good person. He would continue to be the villain the others needed him to be. Unfortunately—or perhaps inevitably—at the very end, he was driven out of his place there as well.

“But you should have earned a new place, right?” After listening in silence all this time, Mirka abruptly spoke up. “You became a duelist and came to this city of your own free will.”

“Hah... My will? It ain’t somethin’ so overblown.”

In essence, he had barely any say in the matter.

“It ain’t easy to change how you live your life. When a guy like me tries findin’ work somewhere else, he doesn’t last long. I became a duelist to live, is all.”

Try as he might to find work outside of the village, there was no place for someone who had lived as a villain. Haring chose the path of a duelist in order to survive.

It was a petty, worthless reason.

“In the first place, the only reason I even considered becoming a duelist was ‘cuz some random geezer said I looked the part. I got no regrets if I quit.”

Haring didn’t feel like speaking more, and he didn’t even know why he had spoken so long at all. He hung his head again.

“Isn’t that enough? Just close the wall.”

“Very well. Your verdict will be handed down in three days. Until then, you should think long and hard, okay?”

“...What do you mean?”

“I mean exactly what I say. There’s nothing else for you to do here. It’s a good chance to look back over your past.”

A smile on her face, Mirka brushed a hand over her own proof. Slowly, inch by inch, the jail cell door swung closed, and the outside light faded away.

“The reason you fight—I hope you can remember.”

With her words of prayer, the wall finally sealed off with a click.



With Café Argent as their base of operations, Yuri, Athena, and Fram devoted all their time to finding a witness. Mirka had told them the deadline was noon in three days. That was when the final verdict would be issued, and they needed to have all the right components to have the claim withdrawn in time.

A day had gone by since then, but unfortunately—

“It’s no good, Athena missy! I asked every single person I know who goes to that dungeon, but that day, the way to floor fifty was closed off, so most of ‘em just turned back and went home!”

“I see... Thanks for trying, Mr. Vander.”

“Real sorry. I wanted to help, I really did!” After vexedly scratching his head, the dwarf, a regular customer, apologetically left the shop.

On the day that Yuri had fought Wallis...the other duelists found themselves unable to reach any floor fifty and up, and many of them who reached that

point simply turned back and went home. Not only was this information spread across the city bulletin, the warp gate malfunction was made into an official announcement by management. As half of the dungeon was now off-limits until the problem could be sorted out, a majority of duelists simply gave up on entering the dungeon entirely.

It was also their misfortune that they were dealing with Navie the Tormentor.

“...It seems this Navie guy is pretty terrible.” Fram fiddled with her proof as she sullenly stuffed the cake of the day into her mouth. “He mainly operates in the dungeon, but...he extorts duelists, orders his men to obstruct paths, seals off transfer gates, intentionally leads dangerous monsters towards innocent bystanders—the list goes on and on. After he’s acted out in the open so many times, I’m perplexed as to why he hasn’t been properly punished.”

Elias scowled as he peeked at Fram’s screen. “Hm. The worst part is that none of his misdeeds involve dueling. If it were a duel, then the footage would remain, but this way there’s no guarantee. Anything that might leave evidence he leaves to his henchmen. His henchmen take the fall, and he gets off scot-free.”

“He’s an Adamant like you. Do you know anything about him?”

“Fortunately, I’ve never had the ill fortune of meeting him. Seeing how I never ran into him when harvesting ingredients in the dungeon, I assume he only messes with duelists lower-ranking than he is.”

“...Meaning he climbed the ranks by only picking on people weaker than him,” Fram scoffed.

Elias shook his head. “The difficult part is that we can never say for sure.”

“...Why not? You’re stronger, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am. But, at the very least, Navie’s followers obey his every order. Is it because of his brutality? His strength? Perhaps he has gathered likeminded fellows...but whatever the case, he’s definitely more than he appears.”

Yuri gazed at the bulletin as he listened in on the conversation. As was to be expected, he wasn’t having any luck finding information. Perhaps because no one wanted to get involved with Navie, there wasn’t anyone proactively

offering information. If that wasn't bad enough, the number of people criticizing Haring for his usual behavior was on a gradual rise. When the topic turned to that, he would have no recourse.

Athena anxiously came over and tried to cheer him up. "It'll all work out, Yuri! We got in touch with some people who might have seen, and maybe they know something!"

But there was no time. The sun was already on its way down, and given an hour, the sky would be dyed a beautiful red. Even if they gathered information without sleep or pause, they effectively had only one day to go. For that very reason...

"I really do think we should confront Mr. Navie directly."

"...You can't. At least, you're not going to be the one to do it."

"That's right! There's no telling what he'll do to you, Yuri!"

Fram and Athena immediately opposed Yuri's proposal.

"But...I'm the one he's after."

Yuri still didn't think he had done anything wrong. Even if what he did was unbecoming of a duelist, he couldn't just keep quiet when Eleanor was about to be hurt and Haring was being showered with such baseless words.

Still, it was true that it was Yuri who started it. At the very least...if it weren't for him, Haring wouldn't be in trouble.

"So if I just hear out Mr. Navie's demands—"

It happened as Yuri shot to his feet in an attempt to persuade his two comrades.

"Hey, hey, heeey. What's this I hear about me?" A voice with a viscous, sticky quality that wouldn't leave the ears.

When Yuri turned in that direction, there, a man was parting the sea of people as he walked towards them.

Blonde, undercut hair and sunglasses. A mouth bent in malicious mockery.

"Hey, what's wrong? What are you looking at me like that for?" Navie must

have found something simply hilarious, seeing as he heartily raised his sandpaper laugh as he approached. He plopped down into a chair across the table from Yuri.

“...Do you have some business with me?” Yuri asked.

“Oh, don’t be so cold. The moment I heard you were doing your best to save some idiot called Haring, I ran all the way over to make sure you were okay.”

He chuckled, gazing over Yuri with a rather amused look on his face.

“Calm down. I came alone today. Even someone as great as myself can’t conduct business right in the middle of the city.”

Sure enough, his tag-alongs were nowhere to be seen.

Yuri slowly stood before...lowering his head to Navie.

“...I’m sorry.”

“Oh? What’s all this now?”

“Even if it was spur of the moment, I injured one of your comrades. I thought I should start by apologizing for that.”

“Not bad. I don’t hate good and honest kids. It was our idiot who was about to start things, I don’t blame you for snapping.” Navie’s smile deepened as he heard Yuri’s apologetic words. “So I’m not angry at you. A broken arm is just what he deserved.”

“...There’s no time left. Please withdraw your complaint against Mr. Haring.” Yuri kept his head down, earnestly making his plea. “He’s a precious friend to me. I want to fight alongside him, to explore the dungeons together, to spend more fun days with him... He’s one of my precious comrades.”

He didn’t want to be unable to see Haring anymore, especially not like this. He didn’t want Haring to be gone from the days of excitement that lay ahead of him.

“Please. Don’t steal my friend from me.”

The whole time, he kept his head down to the man trying to drive Haring away.

“I see. Well, you lowered your head and all. I guess this is where I stand down.” Navie folded his arms, nodded a few times before—

“Like hell, did you really think I would say that!? How thick can you be!?”

Navie spat at Yuri’s head.

“Hyahahahahah! Don’t steal my friend from me, he says! After all I’ve done, you seriously expect me to say, ‘alright, I’ll go away’!?”

Back and forth, his laugh echoed through the streets. He laughed and he laughed until Yuri felt his detestable tone would be stuck in his head for all eternity.

A moment ago, he said, “After all I’ve done.” According to Athena, no duelists came forward to offer information. The posts on the bulletin were being diverted to an unnatural extent.

“I said...we’d have a fun game.” His mouth stretched tight enough to burst, Navie spread his hands wide in a grandiose display. “I call it—the watch-the-hopeless-pipsqueak-fall-into-despair-and-come-begging-to-me game! Thanks for the wonderful show!”

With each word from Navie, Yuri clenched his fist hard enough to break the skin. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be able to maintain his rationality.

“...Meaning, there is no room for negotiation?”

“Negotiation? Just how optimistic can you be? I’m telling you, I just wanted to see that despair-filled look on your face.”

And every time Yuri spoke, that malicious laugh resounded. If he wasn’t going to listen...then so be it. The city did provide another means of resolution.

“Let’s have a duel—Mr. Navie.” Anger seething in his eyes, Yuri held out his own proof. “I, Yuri Eniastar...challenge Navie Ionesca to a contractual duel.”

Directing more malice than he had ever in his life, Yuri glared at the man standing so brazenly before him. And yet—

“Hah? Of course not. Why would I ever do that?” Navie shrugged, his mouth in a vile smirk.

“What—you’re declining a duel!?”

“Hey, hey, heeey! You’re making it sound like it’s wrong to decline a duel? I mean, there’s no obligation to accept every duel thrust at you.”

He was correct, in that regard. In Duel City Babel, there was no actual need to accept a duel. It was shameful, deplorable even, to run away from a challenge, but this was simply a tacit understanding among duelists; no measures would actually be taken against someone who declined a duel.

“And then what...hahah! A contractual duel? You’re the one cornered here, there’s absolutely nothing in it for me. And yet, you put your idiocy on full display, getting all worked up over a duel!”

Navie teased him for acting like an honorable duelist should.

“Are you lot misunderstanding what a duel really is? When you get down to it, a duel’s just a fight to the death. Now, when your life’s on the line, it doesn’t matter what means you use. There’s no real difference whether you kill them, physically or socially, but you keep trying to bring in such ridiculous notions as sanctity and pride—” Navie said with a sneer. “And it’s because this place is full of idiots like you...that dealing with duelists sure is easy.”

Yuri was at the end of his patience.

“You don’t...get to speak of duelists.” His bloody fist quivering, Yuri took a strong step forward, knocking over the table. “Everyone...unlike you, seeks to battle with pride...!!”

Unable to contain the strength welling from the depths of his body, he concentrated it and his rage on his right arm.

“You don’t—get to speak of us duelists!!”

He swung his right arm at the man with clear murderous intent. A single, killing blow to pulverize everything before him. But—his fist didn’t reach Navie. His arm was contained, fastened to the ground by a pillar of pale-blue ice. A large sword held him down before he could take the next step.

“Yuri, you’d better not cross that line.”

“If you do that, you’ll be a step closer to that guy...!!”

Fram and Athena held him down, desperately trying to contain him. Even so, Yuri's anger didn't subside.

"Please let me go! I— That man is the one guy I'll never forgive!"

Yes, the man simply oozing ill intentions right in front of him. The man who was about to steal his friend, without even leaving the option of dueling. The man who insulted the very notion of a duelist.

"Hahah! Nice, very nice. If the girls weren't with you, I'd have been able to run you out of Babel, you know!" Watching Yuri driven mad by rage, Navie clapped his hands like he was watching the greatest show.

Yuri would never forgive him. This man alone, he would never forgive.

"Man, I had a good laugh." Navie stood and turned his back to them. "There ain't a thing you can do—Mix-blood."



And, with a grand laugh, he was off. Yuri simply stared at his back until he was completely gone.

As the power drained from his body, the ice shattered and the sword was released.

“...I’m sorry for causing such a ruckus.” Yuri apologized not only to Fram and Athena but to all the people who had gathered to watch.

“It’s nothing for you to apologize for. If you hadn’t moved first, Yuri, we would have hit him.”

“You got that right! Someone like that should just get kicked out of the city!”

The girls nodded in support of him.

“But...it seems you’ve made some headway.” Elias tossed him a towel, glancing over at the rubbernecks watching the events that transpired. The exchange had left them with dubious looks on their faces, and they were beginning to gossip.

“That one was a bit...you know?”

“Don’t wanna get involved with The Tormentor, but...refusing to fight as a duelist, now that’s gotta be wrong for someone living in the duel city.”

“Don’t forget, he did all that after the mix-blood kid apologized.”

“Yeah, that’s definitely going too far. Wouldn’t want to be grouped with him.”

“Don’t you think city management will do something if they file a claim for this one?”

“I doubt it. Management is harsh on the abuse of contracts, but bad behavior just gets a warning. Duelists are supposed to solve their own personal problems.”

“Wasn’t there a talk about this before?”

“Yeah, you know, when the God of Destruction killed a duelist in the dungeon.”

Yuri listened in to the bustling conversations—and suddenly lifted his head.

“I see... If I do that—”

“...Yuri? What’s up?”

“Did you think up a good idea?”

“No, it’s not a good idea. I think it’s the worst possible method.”

He did think up something, but it was definitely worse than any of his other ideas.

“One wrong move and we might not be able to take part in the Roulette. Forget about that, I might even be exiled from the duel city.”

It was simply that poor of a play. He would actually consider himself lucky if exile and the confiscation of his Proof were all that happened to him. The reason being—he would be risking not death in a duel, but actual death.

“My apologies, Athena, Fram, please stay on standby for this one. It’s far too dangerous. I’d like to do it alone.”

“Do you honestly think we’ll listen after you’ve said that?”

“Gnnn... I don’t want you to be in danger alone. Let me help out!”

“Hm. Start by saying what it is. If I support it, I’ll keep them here.”

Getting those replies from Fram, Athena, and Elias, Yuri gave a general outline. At the end of it, the three nodded— “Umm... You’re not joking, are you?”

“How should I put this, Yuri, you’re a genius at being reckless...”

“You’ve definitely inherited the worst parts of Reilly...”

—And offered a scathing review.

“But it’ll definitely be effective. As you said, it’s the worst method, and we’ll be punished for it, but...we’ll have a chance to get rid of those fiends.”

Having received Elias’s seal of approval, Yuri turned back to the gossiping crowds.

“—Duelists! Could you lend me your ears for a minute!?”

He raised his voice, causing the mob to grow silent.

“I...cannot forgive that Navie Ionesca! He framed my innocent friend, showed no remorse or shame for his actions, conducted himself in a way unbecoming of a duelist, and insulted the duelists who fight with pride and conviction!”

Cheers of endorsement sprouted from all around.

“You said it, rookie! You’ve got my vote!”

“Even with the Beheader as your opponent, you didn’t run away! You’re a hundred times more a duelist than that scumbag!”

“Got that right! Anyone who saw your fight, we duelists especially, know you’re in the right!”

The voices gushed forth; they raised their arms in approval. And seeing them...Elias couldn’t help but smile.

“I knew it, Eniastar really is fit to be a leader.”

“Yes. It took just a few words to move the hearts and minds of so many people. He takes exorbitant actions strong enough to sway people... That’s our leader,” said Fram to Elias as she stared at Yuri’s back. “If he lived in a different time—perhaps he’d have been called a hero.”

Her words were erased by the cries of the crowd. And Yuri raised his voice loud enough that it wouldn’t be drowned out.

“Perhaps the duel city will be in an uproar because of us. Even so, I will fight. We live to fight, and no matter how cowardly and underhanded my opponent may be, I shall stand against him with my fists!” Yuri proclaimed, seeming rather proud of himself. “For that is a Duelist’s way of life!!”



From his dimly lit room, Haring could sense that the end was near. His life as a duelist would be over very soon. He was driven from the village, driven from the town, and now he would be driven from the duel city he had wound up in. Even so, he strangely didn’t feel miserable about it. It wasn’t that great of a life to begin with, so what did it matter what happened at this point?

Mirka’s words were the one thing that seemed to be holding him back.

“The reason you fight—I hope you can remember.”

He never had such a reason. Thinking back now, he had never once actually wanted to fight. Not once in his life. He had just grown irritated and smacked the kids who pranced around calling him a “nuisance.”

Once upon a time, the daughter of the guardian who took him in told him, *“You sure are kind, Haring!”*

She was born after he was adopted, so she was something of a younger sister to him, and she likely saw him the same way.

“I mean, you ignore it when people say bad things about you, but you always get angry when they insult me or dad. But if you go too crazy, dad will shout at you again.”

She said it as if she was completely unaware. The kids would jeer. He’d reach the end of his patience. And Haring would hit them. That’s all it was to Haring.

“Hey, hey, tell me about the world outside the village! Oh, we can play the guessing game! I know you have another name, but you never tell me what it is!”

By that point, it wasn’t just the villagers. Even his guardian called him Haring, and the girl never had the chance to learn his old name. That’s why she would often play a game.

If he left her alone, she would continue spewing out random, silly, nonsensical names forever, so he would always just give up and tell her stories of the times he left the village.

The village adults would never leave unless for work, and the kids were forbidden from leaving. Without any place to be, Haring would often venture outside to kill time, and not a single villager ever tried to stop Haring the nuisance.

The limited exposure made every story so new and fresh to the girl.

Whenever he told her about anything, she’d ask, *“What’s that?”*

“What sound does that animal make?”

“Was the flower beautiful? What did it look like?”

Just answering all her questions would make the sun set. She really was a

troublesome girl who wanted to know everything.

“Hey, Haring! What story are you going to tell this time?”

But Haring didn't hate to be called Haring by her. She would never say it with the same meaning as the other villagers. And, one day—she would never say his name again.

The girl got into a quarrel with the village kids and took a tumble down the cliff. She managed to survive but wouldn't open her eyes. Before she closed them for the last time, the girl told Haring what had happened.

“Haring, you always get angry for other people, so I decided I would get angry for you.”

She had heard the village kids badmouthing him, and that had sparked an argument, his guardian told him. Immediately after he heard the details, Haring hunted down the kids who pushed her and beat them to the verge of death. His guardian stood up for him, but he was ultimately banished.

He would soon find himself going from town to town looking for work. It was in one of these towns that he came across a peculiar old man.

“Ni shi shi! Haring? Why, isn't that a peculiar name!”

If he was remembering right, it was the day he'd picked a fight with a customer and gotten fired from yet another job. Yes, he remembered hearing the voice when he was lying by the side of the road without a penny to his name.

“To think, someone called ‘Nuisance’ would get into a fight to protect someone! I was holding my stomach in laughter when that drunkard you punched went straight through the wall!”

Considering the old man somewhat pretentious, Haring opted to ignore him. Surely he would leave eventually. Unfortunately, the old man just kept talking.

“You, why did you decide to punch him?”

It was only then that Haring finally took a look at him. A withered old man in a tattered old robe. While he could see the tip of an auburn tail peeking out from the end of his clothes, he was thin, so scrawny it was hard to believe he was

from the Dragon Tribe.

“You should have known what would happen to you if you hit him.”

Of course he did. He’d been fired for something similar a number of times. This was hardly the worst one. When things really got bad, he would be driven out of town and permanently banned.

But what was he supposed to do? His body moved on its own.

He answered as such, prompting the old man’s mouth to curve like a crescent moon.

“Ni shi shi...you understand what will happen, but are unable to restrain your instincts? At a glance it may seem foolish, but—I don’t see it that way.”

The old man held out a map and a cloth bag. The path to Duel City Babel and more than enough coins for the ferry.

“Haring, my boy. Have you ever thought of becoming a duelist?”

When Haring glanced at him, the old man gave a toothy smile.

“You may not realize it, but those instincts are rare and precious. You can get angry, not for yourself, but for others—that is the foundation of the conflict in your heart.”

The old man left, leaving the map and bag behind.

“He...really was an incomprehensible geezer.”

Haring found himself smiling as he thought back to the scene. He had swallowed that enigmatic man’s words and had come to the duel city. A place that would accept even someone who only knew how to live as a villain.

And—

“Mr. Haring!”

Haring lifted his face at the sudden mention of his name. He hadn’t even noticed the wall of the jail open.

The glass wasn’t there this time. Standing right in front of him was Yuri, with his usual smile.

“...What is it, brat. They sent you to read off my verdict?”

“No. I came because I have a favor to ask you,” said Yuri, who happily went on to say, “We’re about to do some bad things.”

“.....Hah?”

“We’re driving Navie Ionesca out of the city. Please help out.”

“I’m sayin’ I have no idea what you’re sayin’. Why do I have to—”

“It has to be you, Haring,” Athena interrupted, stepping out in front.

“You remember the girl who was saved from the slave incident, don’t you?”

“...What about her?”

“The kid was crying the whole time, muttering, ‘save them.’” Athena’s expression turned bitter as she recalled the scene. “You heard her too, didn’t you?”

“.....Yeah.”

There was no way he would ever forget. It had never left his mind, not for a moment.

He could still remember the girl who sniffled and cried and held out a filthy copper coin.

“Now’s our chance to save the kids. So we want you to help.”

Athena reached her hand for Haring. And...another hand was also thrust before his eyes.

“Mr. Haring, I’ll ask you again,” Yuri smiled as he repeated what he once said before. “Please, oh please—won’t you fight by our side?”

Last time, he wouldn’t have taken the hand. Haring had lived alone; he would never borrow the strength of others. But— “...I’ll hear you out. What’s the plan?”

He couldn’t leave the city like this. He couldn’t quit being a duelist just yet.

“I remember—there’s still somethin’ I have to do here.”

Chapter 5

Haring heard the details along the way. They had proposed an *on-site inspection of the slave incident* to Mirka, which allowed for Haring to be temporarily released. They would have to return him before the deadline lest they suffer heavy penalties themselves.

And...Haring also understood why Yuri had said he needed him. It was—
“Good of you to come here, eh Haring?”

He heard a sticky voice from the shadows. Navie the Tormentor appeared, raising the corners of his lips.

“I wasn’t expecting you, you know? Aren’t you supposed to be in the slammer?”

“...It ain’t anythin’ special. See, I’m leavin’ the city anyway, so I just asked a nice receptionist for permission to pack my bags,” Haring replied as he lowered the cloth bag slung over his shoulder to the ground.

They were currently on the first floor of the purgatory district’s forest dungeon.

Unless they were from a nocturnal race, it was rare for duelists to enter the dungeons at night. If they ran into monsters while visibility was limited, even the weaker ones could prove to be a threat. Additionally, hardly anyone stopped to hunt or collect resources on the very first floor, and there was no point in anyone setting up camp there. As the monsters were already hunted thin by the duelists who pressed on, there would be nothing to get between them.

That was why Haring had designated the dungeon to call Navie out.

“Oh really... So you want me to help you get your things in order?” Navie directed a spiteful look at Haring’s bag.

Haring made sure he was looking before opening it. Glistening brilliantly in

the dark—a mountain of gold coins.

“This is everythin’ I own, everythin’ I’ve managed to save up. It should be more than enough; now you fulfill your end of the bargain.”

“Bargain? Did we have something like that?”

Haring could feel his anger flare up as he watched Navie play dumb, but he calmly kept his emotions in check.

“Those kids you still have under contract—I’m buyin’ the lot of them.”

The moment he heard those words, Navie could bear it no longer and burst into laughter.

“Hya—hahahahah! Oi, seriously? You really got it!? I was sure it was impossible for you, so I threw out a ridiculous ten million, but you really got it!? Even I’m surprised!” Navie held his stomach as he stared at the fortune placed before him.

Haring had definitely done some unreasonable things to gather this money. He trudged through the dungeon collecting materials day in and day out, and if he saw any duelist with anything valuable, he would challenge them, no matter who they were. Naturally, this pitted him against duelists far stronger than himself, and it was thanks to this that he had lost his rank before.

Haring threw out another bag. “And these here are the materials I got back from the brat who lashed out at you... It’s stuffed full of magic ores from the bottom floor. I know you ain’t an honest man, but all this together puts me at twenty million. Feel like sellin’ yet?”

“I see... If you’re going that far, you leave me with no choice but to hear you out.”

A gurgling giggle at the back of his throat, Navie spread his arms in an exaggerated display.

“To be honest, Haring, I had a pretty high opinion of you. I caught wind of a guy who would do anything for money, and the rumors didn’t lie. You really would do aaaanything. You cheated other duelists, you ambushed them in the dungeon at night, and you snatched all their materials... And when it came to

watching those kids, you know?”

Navie was right. When Haring first came to the duel city, he needed money no matter what. A young girl who was practically family to him fought for his sake. He needed the money to treat her...and would do whatever it took to get it.

He used other duelists as stepping stones. He knowingly carried out the jobs from Navie without hesitation. Once, he put the abducted children to work, circulating their handicrafts to swindlers to rake in money from the sightseeing district. Once, he drove all the duelists from a floor so the kids could harvest materials for days without rest. That was his job, so he would fulfill his duty.

“That’s why I didn’t put you under contract. You’d do what I said as long as I paid, and you were always exceeding my expectations. I didn’t want to ruin what we had.”

Navie’s followers all exchanged a contract which stated they were “forbidden from taking any actions that will prove disadvantageous to Navie Ionesca.” It was unclear whether this was carried out through negotiation or threats, but it was because of this contract that Navie’s men followed his every word.

“I know a few things happened between us, okay. When you let that bitch get away, I’ll be honest, I was thinking up all sorts of ways to murder you, but...you didn’t say a word about me. That’s why I let you do as you please.”

After Haring let a girl get away, he didn’t offer a word of testimony. He knew that even if he did say something, a man as cautious as Navie wouldn’t leave a shred of evidence. And he knew if Navie ever learned of his testimony, the man would either force him into a contract or use every means at his disposal to seal his mouth.

He had...already seen those who lost their lives to keep their lips tight. That was why Haring refused to say a thing. He had to, if he wanted to honor his promise.

“If you join me again, I wouldn’t mind saving you,” Navie proposed with a chuckle.

But Haring knew him too well for that. “That’s what you said...when you killed her brother, isn’t it?”

The captured girl once had a little brother. They were determined to become duelists, both brother and sister, and came to the duel city together. That's what she told him. Despite being placed in a bad situation, they endured it by supporting and encouraging one another.

But, one day, when they returned from a dungeon...the brother was gone. Only the sister stood, stock still, her mind not quite there.

"Oh...I think there was a kid like that? You weren't around, so I took them to the dungeon myself, and they just kept bleating all sorts of annoying noises..."

He had heard the details from the girl. Having been forced to work without rest, the children were at their limit. Seeing the girl collapse, the boy begged Navie to give her some rest.

"Sure, I'll save you," Navie said. And then—

"—I think I shoved him into a monster nest after that."

There was no way a newcomer who hadn't been a duelist for long, who hadn't received any decent combat experience since coming to the city, could properly take on monsters.

"Right, right, that was the best! 'Save me, save me please!' The sound kept coming from the hole like a broken record! All those other rebellious kids got all quiet all of a sudden; it was just what I needed. I sure as hell felt saved."

He chuckled, speaking of his terrifying deeds with pride.

"But hey, I diiid step in and save him around the time the monsters had eaten through his arms and legs. Gave him medical treatment and everything. Unfortunately, he was completely broken from the shock, so I had to sell him off to someone who was into that sort of thing. Those kids are valuable merchandise to me."

Like that, the little brother had died. Not as a lifeform; his dignity was trampled into the ground, his spirit rotted away through fear and pain. He had died as a duelist, as a person.

"...Sold him off, eh," Haring repeated, sticking a hand into his pocket.

Once upon a time, the girl asked Haring, *"Why are you doing this to us?"* to

which Haring replied, *"I'll do any job I've been paid for."* So the girl made a plea.

"I've...put this job off for quite a long time."

Her hand quivered as she handed over the copper coin that day. A coin she had desperately searched for, her younger brother in mind.

She entrusted Haring with two requests. The first: she wanted to save the captured children. And if he wanted to carry out the other one, he would first need to see the children saved. Once the children were extracted, their safety secured from the threat that was Navie, he could finally carry out that request.

However...Haring's comrades had taken over that part of the job.

"Looks like I can finally get to work." Haring flipped the coin high into the air. "I'm here to beat the shit outta you, Navie Ionesca."

The moment he said that, Navie's cheeks nearly burst from laughing.

"Oh, oh I see! So that's why you called me out to the dungeon." He jovially hit his hands together again and again.

If they were temporarily away from the duel city, in a situation which would leave no evidence or witnesses, death could be written off as the result of a monster attack. An accident.

But that was all within Navie's expectations.

"You sure are stupid...Haring. When I've used similar methods to murder idiots before, there's no way I came here alone."

Those words as the signal, silhouettes emerged from the dark behind Navie. One, two, three...more than ten of them. Navie's tag-alongs circled around to cut off Haring's path of escape.

"Now then... You came all the way here to rant at me. You'd prefer it if I took you on directly, wouldn't you?"

His arms spread out, Navie smiled.

"It's time to play—Nix Negate."

The shadow that stretched out behind him squirmed. Bit by bit, it gained a definite outline and mass, creeping up in the shape of arms. Two massive

shadow hands.

This was the Demon Tribe's Tribe Skill: Familiar. An ability to create faithful servants who lived off the mana of their wielder.

"How about a game of tag?"

The massive arms launched at Haring, but Haring managed to react before they got the chance.

"That garbage attack ain't gonna work!"

Haring smacked the ground, causing a mass of earth to form right before his eyes. This was an application of Dragonification.

The fundamentals of the Dragon Tribe's Dragonification wasn't simply to transform one's self into a dragon. It was grounded in manipulating and reforming the basic elements. Dragonification was little more than the application of this concept to reform oneself as a dragon.

Haring chose to transmute an earthen wall to defend himself. However, a shadow arm appeared right in front of him like it had slipped through his wall entirely.

"What!?"

He reflexively raised his arms to guard, but the weight of the blow caused his large body to stagger back.

"Dammit...! They're just as slippery as their master...!" Haring groaned as he held back the shadow hand that wouldn't stop forcing its way towards him.

He had definitely erected a wall to block. But the arm had crept up from the shadow of the wall. A Familiar that could freely move within shadows.

"What now? What's wrong? You like arm wrestling more than tag?"

The pushing arm was growing stronger, and Haring's braced legs were sinking into the ground.

"I ain't here to play around!" Aiming for the moment the hand grew stronger, Haring twisted his body. Having lost its oppositional force, the shadow hand shot off behind him. But, not a moment later, a different arm stabbed him in

the back.

“.....!?”

Without any proper means to block it, Haring fell flat on the ground.

“Hey, hey, heeey! Did you forget I showed you two of them at the start? Just how idiotic can you be, Haring?” He boisterously drummed the two hands against the ground, as if to rile Haring up.

By no means had Haring forgotten about the second hand. When he dodged, he made sure to keep wary of it.

“Nix Negate loves to play in the shadows...and it doesn’t care whose shadow it is.”

No matter how experienced a fighter was, there would always be a blind spot in their field of vision. It wasn’t easy to deal with attacks that came from right behind.

“Tsk... No wonder they call you the Tormentor.”

His opponent used attacks that slipped through defenses and attacked from blind spots. It wouldn’t be wise to take him head-on. But that much wasn’t a problem.

“...I got a feel for the strength of your Familiar.” Haring smiled and smacked his gauntlets together. “That puny hit ain’t enough to damage me.”

The stalwart bodies of the Dragon Tribe were not just for show. Their characteristic steel bones covered in hefty muscles were made to take a hit.

“Dragonification.”

With a quiet murmur, Haring’s body was cloaked in sand. He remained small. While his arms had swelled under their metal protectors, he was smaller now than he had ever been, the way he stood on two legs truly fitting of the term dragonkin.



“Hey, hey, what part of that is Dragonification? All I see is a sad little lizard.”

Navie’s followers similarly showered him with sneers.

Haring banged his gauntlets together. “Quit blabberin’ and come at me already—worthless worm.”

Seeing Haring take his stance, Navie’s expression bent in irritation. “I see... Then croak already!”

It took only a jerk of his chin for the two shadow arms to fly at Haring. And—all of a sudden, one of them was gone.

But Haring already understood the shadow mechanics of Nix Negate.

“Raaaaaah!!” He swung his fist straight at the lone flying arm. When the shadowy specter came into contact with his fist enhanced by an armor of sand, it let off a bizarre sound before being shot off course. Haring used the forward momentum from his punch to take a large leap. The arm hidden in his shadow sliced through thin air.

“—Fucking hell!” Navie cried as he hurriedly called his arms back.

But it was already too late. Haring had removed as much excess as he could. His current form was built for speed, and the shadow arms weren’t able to keep up.

“Your arms have to move from shadow to shadow.”

That was why Navie’s first blow was carried out with only one arm. As one flew, the other hid inside of its shadow. Once the first arm was close enough to the enemy, the hiding arm shifted to their shadow to launch a surprise attack.

And now, both arms were stuck in the air. There was no worry of a sneak attack; they wouldn’t be able to catch him.

“Here’s that first blow.”

Haring stared straight at Navie as he grew closer and closer, putting power into his fist. He hammered the strongest blow he could muster into the man’s lanky body.

“—Waaaaaaaah!?” Navie let out a pathetic shriek as he was blown back, the

gold coins from the sack scattered into the night air.

Haring let out a light breath.

The fallen Navie showed no signs of getting up.

The Demon Tribe were physically weak, second only to the Spirit Tribe in terms of frailty. Without their Familiars for defense, even a single strike could prove fatal. He wouldn't be able to stand after taking a blow from the Dragon Tribe, let alone in a Dragonified state.

But it wasn't over yet.

"I'm far from through with you."

He took a step towards Navie. Just one punch wasn't enough to contain his rage.

"I'll keep beatin' you 'til you're a bloody pulp...!"

As the flames of wrath blazed, and he approached a fallen Navie step by step—something suddenly grasped his leg. He looked down. His right leg was in the grip of an arm growing from his shadow.

"Just kidding!"

The moment he heard that irksome voice, Haring's right leg was crushed in its grasp.

"Gah—aaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

The creaking sound of something cracking resounded throughout his body, and Haring cried out in dismay. All the while, Navie stood, brushing the dirt off his clothing.

"Nice, nice, very nice! That voice, that expression! The despair that comes after convincing yourself you've won is the best." He chuckled to himself in a mad frenzy—it was as if he had lost his mind. The two shadow arms floating in the air began to clap at Haring's sorry state.

"A-A third one...!" Haring squeezed out, staring at the new arm grasping his leg.

In a complete reversal, Navie now sauntered over to a toppled Haring.

“You’re pretty stupid, you know... I told you I started off with two. I never said that was all I had.”

Navie’s throat gurgled again after he kicked Haring in the face. The arms began to creep up from his shadow. They gathered around Navie like swarming flies.

“You really are an idiot.”

Eight shadow arms took to the sky. They grabbed Haring’s limbs and fastened him to the air.

“Let me guess what’s on your mind. You thought I’m the sorta guy who earned all his rate through underhanded means. That my rank’s just a decoration, right?”

He smiled wide as he admired his own handiwork keeping Haring in place.

“What if I told you I’m a genuine Adamant?”

Again came the jarring, cracking sounds of breaking bones. As his body was helplessly crushed in Navie’s grasp, a trickle of blood dripped from his mouth.

“Y...you...godforsaken...!!”

“Hya—hahahahahah! Pretty talkative for a guy with one foot in the grave.”

Slowly, slowly, the shadow arms increased in strength to inflict as much suffering as possible. It kept going on for what seemed like an eternity. He could still hear those wretched, painful sounds break out intermittently from different parts of his body. Navie was a man well-versed in torture, who knew how much it took to fully break someone. He was going to take his sweet time to reach that point.

Still, Haring wouldn’t stand down.

“I...made...a promise to that brat...!”

An inferno continued to burn in his eyes. Mustering all his might, he desperately reached his right hand for the demon.

“I gotta give you...the smacking she couldn’t...!!”

He didn’t take the job out of pity for the girl. His instincts screamed that he

just had to do it. Her bottomless anger had spurred something strong within him too.

That was how it had always been. When those dear to him were insulted, his fist would fly as if it had taken on their honor. When those dear to him were injured, his fist would take on their regret. When the girl was beaten down, he would stand to his feet, having taken on her anger.

“I’ve always fought for someone else’s sake...” Leaving his body to instinct and indignation, he thrust his fist out despite the pitiful sounds it emitted. “I ain’t gonna let that end now!”

He would always find himself acting in someone else’s place, fighting to carry out their sentiment. That was the origin of the conflict within Haring’s heart.

“You’re the one guy I ain’t never gonna forgive...”

Despite Haring’s frantic attempts to make his plea, the eyes Navie saved for him were terribly cold.

“Oh, I see... Now that’s quite a reason you’ve got there.” He scoffed, disappointed, and nudged his chin towards Haring. “For now, how about you just die?”

The swarming shadow hands covered his entire body. The moment before they all contracted to crush Haring’s body in its entirety—

“No, the one dying here is you,” echoed a familiar voice.

A figure slowly walked forth—a boy with a black sword in one hand. The blood-stained visage of Yuri Eniastar.



The sight of Yuri’s meandering trek caused some of the followers to shriek. That was simply how menacing the air about him had become.

Fresh blood dripped from his sword. His clothes were stained a sticky dark red, and with each step, parts of the dried blood clinging to his face would crumble away.

In such a ghastly, horrendous state, Yuri cheerfully grinned.

“A pleasure, Mr. Navie. It’s been...perhaps a few hours?” Yuri greeted him as casually as if he was meeting an old friend.

“Hey, hey, hey...what are you doing out here, pipsqueak?” Navie dubiously furrowed his brow.

“Oh? Is my appearance not telling enough?” The boy flaunted his blood-smeared clothes and laughed. “I came here to kill all of you.

“Not just you, Mr. Navie,” Yuri went on, the bone-chilling smile never leaving his face. “Those who helped you, those who sympathized with you...such folks are all equally the enemy of duelists everywhere. So I decided I would kill everyone who wasn’t a real duelist.”

Seeing Yuri calmly take his stance, Navie mockingly snorted. “Hah! Kill us all? Do something like that, and city management won’t—”

“Oh no, as a duelist, I won’t be held accountable.” His eyes filled with madness, Yuri joyfully spread his arms.

Once upon a time, there were the incidents where the God of Destruction, Wallis, ended up killing duelists.

“If I make my intent to duel clear enough, even if I attack with enough force to kill, it can be written off as excessive provocations—and I will say it loud and clear: I want to duel you. Do you know what that means?”

Slowly, Yuri trickled blood with another step.

“If you do not accept—it doesn’t matter if I do kill you.”

The smile of a lunatic on his face, Yuri looked at everyone gathered.

“I’ve already finished taking care of your comrades. Everyone who agreed to duel was bound to a contract, ‘I will confess everything I’ve done,’ but...those who refused to duel to the bitter end were killed by my hand.”

He painstakingly wiped away some of the blood.

“Go ahead and check if you doubt me. Of course, the people who dueled are being interrogated by city management, and the rest are either heavily wounded or dead.”

Navie continued to look at him suspiciously, but he eventually began working with his own Proof. Indeed, no one was answering his calls. Not a single one.

“Oh right, I’m sure you’re thinking, ‘we’ll be safe so long as we can return to the city,’ so I’ll tell you in advance. City management personnel are already on standby at the entrance to this dungeon. They will apprehend you the moment you’re out.”

“Tsk... Aren’t you coming out a bit too big for a bluff? My underlings are all bound by contract. They can’t say a single thing against me.”

“Yes, but what about everyone else?”

It was the surrounding tag-alongs who were flustered by those words.

“Certainly, they can’t testify about Navie Ionesca. But they can talk freely about their other comrades. You made it that way specifically so your men could take the fall for you. But if everything your little group ever did comes to light, you won’t be able to escape your crimes.”

If everything was put out in the open, the end of their dueling careers would be the least of their worries. They all understood what they had done well enough.

“And as everyone testifies, there will be a gaping hole left, the perfect size for a certain someone to fill... If it were only a few people, you’d get off with suspicions, but what about dozens of them? City management will be forced to conduct a thorough investigation of Navie Ionesca and keep him under constant surveillance.”

The individual known as Navie Ionesca would face societal death.

“I see now...but aren’t you forgetting something?” Navie said, nodding his head at Haring who was still a prisoner of the shadow hands.

“If you’re going to tell me it’s all over, I’m going to contort this guy to death, right? That is, only if you intend to sacrifice your precious friend to convict me.”

Navie had no need to lose his composure. He still had a usable hostage in Haring.

“—Mr. Haring, you can move now.”

Shortly after Yuri said that, Haring raised his lowered head.

“Well, thanks for that, I almost couldn’t hold in my laughter anymore.”

Haring went on to tear off the arms covering him with brute force. Navie’s eyes opened wide as he watched the man lightly land on the ground.

“It ain’t enough to damage me...I already told you.” A creaking noise came as Haring clenched his fist.

With his normal Dragonification made from dirt and sand, he wouldn’t have gotten off unharmed. That was why Haring made sure to prepare in advance.

“Ain’t no one gonna crumble this body of magic ores.”

He had brought plenty of high-quality ores along with the money. Not only did they disperse physical force, they were stones imbued with all sorts of properties. And Haring wore them as his armor for Dragonification.

“With your piece-of-shit personality, I knew you’d start tormentin’ me the moment you knew I’d been defeated. Slowly...takin’ your smug time to enjoy it.”

Navie grit his teeth. “From the start...you were just the decoy...”

Haring’s role was to call out Navie and stall him for as long as possible. During that time frame, Yuri and the others would take care of Navie’s other goons he had lured out.

With his comrades gone and nowhere to run, Yuri had snatched away all his options.

“Now...you can’t run away anymore.” Yuri informed him with a smile, holding up his black sword. “If you return to the city, you’ll be condemned for your crimes and face societal death. If you do nothing, you’ll be killed by me. Meaning you only have one option remaining.”

His smile widened as he took another slow step forward.

“There is only one path left for you to survive.”

He riled him up with maddened eyes.

“All you can do is fight us and win. It will do little besides protect what little

dignity you have left, but fighting us is the only way you have to console your vile heart.”

Yuri’s deranged grin was as if he had been possessed by battle itself.

“You’re not just going to give up and die, are you? You’re not going to let a pipsqueak like me get one up on you, and run with your tail between your legs, are you? I mean, you’re Navie Ionesca, the guy who went on and on about how you’re the best.”

Each utterance out of Yuri’s mouth caused Navie’s fists to shake. Finally, Yuri turned to him with the decisive words.

“If you don’t fight here—you’ll be a pathetic loser for the rest of your life.”

The moment the words entered his ears, Navie held his left arm high. “Fine, have it your way. Damn pipsqueak!”

Consent on both sides established the duel, muting the color palette of their surroundings.

“I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you!! You’re dead, pipsqueak!” His malice on full display, Navie brought his eight arms close, like they were appendages attached to his body.

But this wasn’t a one-on-one battle.

“He’s all yours, Mr. Haring.”

“Got it...then I’m leavin’ those annoying arms to you.”

“Of course! Leave it to me!”

Still holding his sword, Yuri smacked his fists together. “It’s my job to open a path for my allies!”

Seeing Haring race forward, Yuri forcefully punched the ground.

“Dragonification Armament,” he muttered, and his arms gave off a strange sound. Something was sprouting from inside of them, the creaking and cracking of bone and flesh torn apart. Jet-black branches—thin, like twigs—burst forth from both his arms, growing out as if to spread their roots into the ground.

“Engorger.”

While this was going on, Navie kicked into action. “I’ll slaughter every last one of you!” He manipulated his eight wriggling arms, shooting them out at a charging Haring. The moment one of the arms was about to grab Haring’s neck —

A black branch shot up from the ground and captured it as if it was swallowing it whole. Sharp spines dug in as twigs grew to coil around the arm like a snake, until the shadow arm had been greedily devoured.

The sight caused panic to cross Navie’s expression. “Dammit, dammit, dammit! Nix Negate!” On Navie’s scream, a shadow arm crept up behind Yuri, but—

“It won’t work.”



A sapling sprouted as if it had been waiting for it.

Like a ravenous beast starved for flesh, it lustfully snapped up the approaching hazard.

“This branch doesn’t move on my will, it reacts to enemy hostility. Even if you launch a surprise attack from my blind spot, your attack will not reach me.”

Before he came here, Yuri had polished this power against Navie’s goons. He had tried to form a strong image around the words he heard from Haring. An absolute defense that would intercept enemy attacks. That was his Dragonification Armament: Engorger.

“If you direct hostility towards my comrades—I’ll protect them no matter what.”

Yuri declared his stalwart will as the branch constricted the shadow arm. But his words didn’t reach Navie. Navie was far too cornered to lend an ear.

“Damn—why, why isn’t my arm regenerating!?” He raised a voice of dismay, looking at where his first arm had vanished.

The Demon Tribe’s Familiar would regenerate so long as its user’s mana didn’t run out. But that arm showed no sign of wriggling back out from his shadow.

A mana-eating plant. The black branch didn’t just intercept strikes, it traced them back to their user and devoured the mana of whoever conducted the hostile attack.

In short—it drained mana from Navie, the master of these familiars.

“There’s no way...I’m going to lose to this pipsqueak...!!”

His arms moved in all sorts of nonsensical directions; it was clear he had grown desperate. Each time they aimed for either Yuri or Haring, they would be captured by a branch from the ground.

“Duelists are just idiots waiting to be sucked dry... There’s no way I’ll lose to them. It’s not going to end—”

His words didn’t go on. Haring was finally right before his eyes.

“It’s over for you, piece of shit.”

His raised fist smashed into Navie's face. A fist with the might of the Dragon Tribe further enhanced by Dragonification shattered his cheek bone. But the force didn't stop there. His frail cervical vertebrae snapped, his head continued to turn until it was facing the opposite direction and—the death of The Tormentor Navie Ionesca signaled the end of the duel.

The sepia-toned space regained its color, the only souvenir from it being Navie, who promptly fell flat onto the ground. The whites of his eyes showed through his cracked sunglasses, and he was frothing at the mouth. The faint scent in the air suggested he had soiled himself.

"Hah... A filthy end's just right for you."

Haring lightly kicked Navie's body before turning to his followers.

"You're up next."

They shrieked out as Haring smashed his gauntlets together.

"Hey, you supported the bastard, and had your share of fun too. You're not gonna tell me you don't wanna die now, eh!?"

After being subjected to Haring's roar, the followers timidly lifted their Proofs.

"Hey, you get ready. No slouchin' on me."

"Same goes to you, Mr. Haring. Please don't ask for any breaks."

Some light banter between them, they held up their Proofs in unison.



They had finished dueling every one of Navie's men. When they dragged their unconscious bodies out of the dungeon, the Babel staff members rushed over in a confused panic.

Perhaps having been dragged out of the other dungeons, those who were presumably Navie's men were being carried around on stretchers. Those who were still conscious were being interrogated by staff.

"Ah, Yuri's out too!"

Athena ran up, waving her hand and tail. Fram and Elias were already there.

"Did everyone make it through fine?" asked Yuri.

“Yes,” Fram replied, “I should’ve expected no less from that man’s followers. Not a spine to be found among them.”

“She’s right. They all got on their knees the moment I drew my sword,” Elias added.

“It was a pain to deal with them, so I blew them sky high!”

Seeing the three of them completely unharmed, Yuri broke into a wry smile...only to be firmly grabbed by the shoulder.

“Nooooow then...Yuri. You’ve got quite some explaining to do...”

He fearfully turned his head to see Mirka, a vein popped up on her forehead.

“Yes, well...how should I put this?”

“Oh, I’ll listen to whatever you have to say. Especially after the terrible ruckus you’ve caused.” Her hand and wings were quivering as she read out his charges. “Abuse of Tribe Skills outside of the Field. Running around the duel city flaunting weapons and magic. Coercing powerless opponents into duels...these are not the sort of charges I can overlook with a smile.”

She wasn’t wrong, they had done precisely that.

After Haring called Navie to the dungeon, Athena, Fram, and Elias had gone around chasing everyone affiliated with Navie. Athena ran around waving her sword and flames, Fram sealed their path with ice, and Elias threatened them with his god-like sword swing.

They spoke on everything that didn’t pertain to Navie. Through this information, they were able to smoke out all the members Haring hadn’t been aware of, and with Yuri—who had been waiting in the dungeons—threatening further, they managed to expose every member of the gang.

This had all been done on Yuri’s suggestion.

“I am prepared to take full responsibility,” Yuri told Mirka up front. “I just couldn’t forgive that man, Navie Ionesca. He called himself a duelist despite doing everything unbecoming of one, and he openly insulted all the duelists earnestly confronting their challengers. That’s why I resolved it in this manner.”

“I see. Even if that means you would have to resign as a duelist?”

Yuri sullenly nodded at the question. “Even if I was told I would have to leave the duel city, I’m sure I would have made the same choice. I thought nothing would change if I didn’t take action, and considering what Mr. Navie had done, and the people held captive by him, I knew I just had to take action.”

Even if the method was wrong, what he accomplished was not. That was what let him stick out his chest.

“I am proud of what I did. I do not feel ashamed.”

A large hand was placed on top of his head. “Sure, the brat proposed the idea, but I’m the one who took lead. I’m the one who offered info about Navie’s mooks, and I’m the one who called out the man himself,” Haring said, taking a step forward.

Athena hopped forward too. “Here, here! I enabled him all the way!”

“In that case, I’m responsible for not putting a stop to you two.”

“I took part instead of taking control of the situation, so I share the offense.”

Seeing Fram and Elias back them up, Mirka held her head and let out a sigh.

“Haaaah! Well, I knew it would come to this, but...!” A wrinkle stretching across her brow, Mirka turned back to Yuri. “I’ll put your punishment on hold for now...but it won’t be that severe.”

“...Err, is that alright?”

“Of course, it isn’t because we’re friends. What you did is deserving of punishment...but what you’ve accomplished is worth enough to offset it,” Mirka said with a glance at the next few stretchers on the way out.

A series of deathly-thin people in filthy robes. The duelists captured by Navie Ionesca.

“You saved these unjustly-imprisoned duelists without a thought to your own safety. If you consider what he’s done in the past, and all the crimes he surely would have done that have been prevented in advance—the official penalty will probably be quite light.”

“But.” Mirka stuck up a finger. “Never Again! Never do something this reckless again! You’ve now been registered as a person requiring special

attention, so next time you'll be heavily punished, no questions asked! You got that!?"

"Yes! Thank you!"

Seeing Yuri diligently lower his head, Mirka let out another sigh.

"Incidentally...why are you covered in blood? If you tell me you actually did kill a few of them, that does change things significantly..."

"Oh, this isn't their blood." Yuri vigorously rubbed off his brow before producing a leather sack from his breast pocket.

"...Blood paste?"

"Yes! A friend of mine assured me it would be very intimidating!"

He borrowed Eleanor's blood pouch and used it for the production. It worked perfectly, and when he threatened, "Those who don't negotiate get killed," while covered in blood, they would cower and agree to testify under contract.

Having seen this process up close, Haring couldn't help but grimace.

"Well yeah, if a guy covered in blood with crazy eyes and a smile like he's clearly lost his mind points a sword at you, anyone'd freak out..."

"The blood aside, I just smiled like I normally do!"

"That's even worse! That's seriously your normal smile!"

"Ah...it was probably that one..."

"That same smile from training... Anyone would run from that..."

With a few ideas of their own, Athena and Fram exchanged an understanding look. Yuri didn't think his smile was unusual, but he was coming to realize it was something terrible.

Whatever the case, the matter with Navie was now settled.

"It's our win, Mr. Haring!" Yuri grinned and held out his fist.

While Haring hesitated for a moment, "...Yeah, it's our win." He returned the smile and touched fists.

Final Chapter

The duel city was once again rowdy with talk of Yuri's party.

"Hey, guys, did you hear? The mix-blood did it again."

"If you're talking about driving out the Tormentor, then hats off to him."

"I was half in doubt when he made a speech about it, but who'da thought he would really go and do it?"

"It was disgusting to see those fake duelists prancing around on their high horses, after all. And now we can go to the dungeons with a bit of peace of mind."

"They say they got all the slave incident victims this time. Good work, I say."

"It's a bit of a gray area, though. Babel staff was pretty pissed."

"Still, you gotta admit, it was pretty refreshing to watch the Flame Deva chasing around Navie's goons."

"And the Ice Jailer freezing them into fine works of art was also a sight to behold."

"Come to think of it, I hear the Beheader lent a hand as well. Do you reckon it was his idea?"

"Nah, he's the Deva's brother, so he helped out, is all. Friend of mine went to see how it all turned out and heard the receptionists saying it was all the mix-blood's idea."

"Come to think of it, Haring was involved again. Anyone know anything about that?"

"I heard he offered info on Navie's gang. I guess he can do good now and again."

"Speaking of Haring, he apparently paid more than ten million in support money for the victims. Maybe that's why he was gathering money?"

“He was involved, so maybe he’s just trying to redeem himself. Well, at least he used it for something good, so I’ll forgive him for the ten copper he shook me down for.”

“He got two of my silvers. Though, I just found them on the side of the road.”

“Oi, those silver were mine, give them back this instant, you bastard.”

Haring smiled bitterly as he gazed at the bulletin. “...Good grief, the people here sure like to get worked up.”

He was back in the holding cell in Babel Tower. His release had been temporary, and now the staff members were all busy interrogating Navie and his men, so his verdict—while it would probably be in his favor—had been put on hold for the moment. At least, that was what Mirka told him.

Strangely enough, he didn’t feel too bad here. Up to this point, he never really had a place where he could kick back and take it easy. Now he had a place to be.

As he basked in his thoughts, the wall to the jail abruptly swung open. “Mr. Haring, would it be alright if I let in a visitor?” a staff member of Babel asked.

“...A visitor? Is it the brat?”

“No, two girls from outside.”

“...Whatever. Let them in.”

The staff member left, and one girl came in. And Haring...opened his eyes wide.

“It’s been a while, Haring.”

“...Yeah, it has been a while,” Haring curtly replied to the young Beast Tribe girl across the glass pane.

A girl he had saved from Navie. She had filled out a bit since he last saw her, but he would never mistake her for anyone.

“You eatin’ well, Foley?”

“...You still remember my name?”

“Haven’t forgotten a single one of you... It was my job to keep an eye on you

guys, remember?”

When he answered as such, Foley stroked the ends of her drooping rabbit ears with a troubled look on her face. “I got called in by someone from Babel. Apparently, they found my brother.”

“.....Really?”

“Yes. They got the date and time of the transaction from the testimonies, arrested the person who bought him, and confiscated him back. I think he’ll be resting back home for a while.”

“.....I see.” Her words did bring him a sense of relief, but Haring’s expression immediately hardened back up. “I’m sorry. Sorry it took so long to free you all, and sorry your brother had to go through all that.”

“N-No, not at all! There’s nothing for you to apologize for! It’s all...every last bit of it is the fault of that man who tricked us.”

While a slight shadow still crossed her face, Foley made a cheerful smile.

“Thank you for fighting for us,” she warmly told him. “It may take some more time to forget the past...but I think it’s because of you that we can move forward.”

Just seeing that smile made him feel like his actions carried some modicum of worth. So Haring reciprocated the gesture.

“Don’t let a bad guy trick you next time.”

“If that happens, will you save me again?”

“I’ll save you whenever you want. But next time, one copper won’t be nearly enough.”

Just as Foley let out a giggle, she suddenly raised her face as if she had just recalled something important. “Come to think of it, I met someone at the docks who said they came to see you, so we came here together... May I bring them in?”

“Mn? Well I don’t mind, but...why didn’t you come in together?”

“Err... According to her, because you’d be really, *really* surprised,” Foley said

and then scampered out of the room.

Haring could hear the sound of some sort of cart rolling in the corridor and—

“Haring! I heard you got into a fight for someone again!”

The moment he heard the voice, Haring rushed up to the glass.

A Dragon Tribe girl in a wheelchair. Her body had wasted away somewhat, and she was thinner than he remembered. The months and years had gone by, so she was more of a woman than when he last saw her. And yet—it was as if her voice was the one thing that never changed.

“Dear me, when dad told me, I felt fed up beyond belief! You are definitely going to lose out in life with that personality of yours! Seriously, it looks like becoming a duelist hasn’t changed you in the slightest!” she said in a teasing tone and then broke into a laugh. Her appearance might have changed, but the vestiges of her old smile remained.

The girl who altered the meaning of his own name.

“Loads of things happened when I was asleep, right? I came all the way here, so you’d better tell me everything!”

And then the girl asked the same question she always would.

“So, Haring! What story are you going to tell this time?”

Haring hung his head. The tears streaming down his face prevented him from looking her in the eye.

“Yeah...it’s gonna be a long story this time.” His voice shook as he violently rubbed his eyes. “I’ve got loads of things I want to tell you.”

Clumsy as it was, Haring did his best to smile.



Mirka took a seat on a rock as she talked to someone over her Proof.

“Being real here, Gandor, I really do have to thank you.”

“Hmmhmm. Which matter might you be referring to?”

“Both of them. For saving Haring last time, and now for bringing his family to

him.”

“Ni shi shi! It matters not. Old as I am, I’m still the Administrator of the Dragon Tribe.”

Her conversation partner...Administrator Gandor gave a peculiar laugh.

“He is, after all, the candidate I’ve placed my hopes on. It wouldn’t be fun if he was crushed by trifling affairs. And if I selected him, it only makes sense to take responsibility for him to the end, don’t you think?”

“You say that, but you’ve pretty much abandoned him up to this point.”

“Ki shi shi. That’s what you call a difference in teaching practices. Little old Velt is putting quite a bit of effort into shaping his candidate, but I’m the sort who lets the base ingredients shine through.”

“I see. So is he going to meet your expectations?”

“Of course he will. Up until now, he was always fighting unaware...but a rare spirit polished solely by fighting to protect others shall surely let him ascend to become a true dragon.”

Mirka quietly closed her eyes, letting Gandor’s gleeful ramble enter her ears. “...Well, all that aside, please do hurry up and come to the city, okay? It pains me to say that Velt’s the only Administrator who’s showed up so far.”

“Sorry about that, Mirka, dearie. We have our hands full with our own continents, but I guess we can’t leave the duel city management in your hands forever.”

“Yes, with all that’s happened lately, I’m about to die from overwork...”

“Hmhmh, that tired? A good groping ought to pep you right—”

“Drop dead, pervy old man.”

After one-sidedly cutting off the conversation, Mirka let out a sigh. “Haaah... I thought it would be more interesting than being an administrator, so I chose this side, but...”

A wrinkle slowly spread across her brow as she recalled the events of the last day. “Well, let’s just get this job over with, so I can make Yuri sleep next to me

as punishment,” she joked before directing her eyes down to the line of several men made to sit in handcuffs.

“Now then, now then, what’s going to happen to you now?” she asked the man in the center, Navie Ionesca.

“Hah... Hell if I know. All I know is that you dragged us out here to exile us from the city.”

They were currently in a ruined, desolate land. Not a speck of green around, only dull brown rock and gravel filled their field of vision.

Mirka broke into a chuckle after hearing that one. “Exile, is it? I’m sorry, that’s not quite how these things work.”

“...What do you mean, eh?”

“I mean what I say, and I say what I mean. You don’t seem to understand what it is you’ve done.” Mirka twirled the tip of her finger as she explained. “If abusing contracts was all you did, you would’ve probably gotten off with exile. However—murder and attempted murder solely for the thrill of it. Slave trafficking, which is prohibited across all the continents. There’s plenty more I could list off, and I must say, you’ve done just a bit too much.”

It would be accurate to call Navie Ionesca a heinous villain. The central figures of his organization who not only knew about his misdeeds but also actively supported him shared the same offense.

“And yet...you want to be exiled? Ridiculous. Laughable. Absurd. If we return a villain like you to your original continent, the peaceful world everyone’s trying so hard to maintain will fall apart.”

Unable to contain her laughter, Mirka’s eyes turned to look down at Navie with scorn.

“Did you honestly believe that exile was the highest punishment the duel city could offer? Did you think, after instilling them with the power to fight, we would offer salvation to those whose thoughts and actions stepped off the path of ethics?”

If someone who not only had the power but used it to maliciously hurt others

was set free, there was no way the peace of the world could be maintained. That was precisely why exile wasn't enough.

"A place for you no longer exists in this world," she firmly declared.

Overwhelmed by her intensity, one of the bound men raised his voice. "I-It ain't my fault! I was just following Navie's orders!"

"T-That's right! I just did it because he was threatening me!"

"I wouldn't have helped him if I knew it would come to this!"

The followers suddenly started acting up. Such ugliness caused Mirka to move a finger to her lips in irritation.

"Ah...just shut up."

Her tone was as if she was dealing with the buzzing of an annoying fly as she protruded a claw from one of her fingers.

"I should start by taking out a few."

A moment after her cold declaration, the bodies of the men who began protesting were vertically bisected.

".....Hah?"

The few who survived turned their heads to what had once been their comrades. They didn't even have to look to know they had died instantly.

"Haaah, I've had enough of this job. It really is such a drag." Her black wings swayed, almost as if she was a child throwing a tantrum. It was like the lives she took meant absolutely nothing to her.

After staring at her for a few moments, Navie's expression turned from shock to smile. "Oh...I get it now." Defeated by his encroaching fear, he raised his voice in a broken laugh. "Hahahahahah! I see, it's you! The mysterious number one! The undefeated duelist who holds the top seat without anyone knowing their name!"

Watching as Navie continued to laugh and laugh, Mirka listlessly pressed a hand to her cheek. "Ah, whatever, just say whatever you want. Your verdict is already set in stone."

After Mirka shifted her blood-stained fingertips, the air rumbled, quivering in fear. An invisible existence lurked in the atmosphere.

Imperfect as they were, being duelists, Navie and his men surely sensed it. And that was why—they surely got a taste of the greatest terror.

“This is my job as head of city management. Don’t fault me for it.”

By that point, her words could no longer reach them. There was nothing left. No bisected bodies, no men cowering in fear, no Navie repeating his broken laugh.

All that remained was a sizable divot in the ground.

“Hah... How boring,” Mirka complained for the umpteenth time as she stared at the impacted earth.

Boring.

Boring.

Boring.

That was the emotion that was always filling her head these past couple hundred years.

“Honestly, I truly envy all those duelists out there. Just by living in the duel city, they can always enjoy their fights.”

Naturally, this should have applied to Mirka as well, a duelist in her own right. However...there was a difference between fighting and violence. The way Mirka saw it, to fight was an impulse that surged up from the depths of one’s heart. Violence was to wield power against anyone who just happened to be in the general vicinity.

At the very least, Mirka never used violence by choice. But she knew in her heart of hearts that she would never be able to have a fight. As Wallis said, Mirka’s strength was seen by others as one-sided violence. She herself, upon seeing her opponents so unequivocally crushed, only ever felt she was using tasteless violence.

At the peak she stood on, no one could fight Mirka in the truest sense. That was why she now placed her hopes and dreams on people like Yuri.

“Fufu. How strong will they grow to be?”

She hoped for their growth more than anyone. The strength gained from growth was one that didn't exist for someone like her, who was strong from the start.

How much power could they gain? Was there a limit to their strength? Would they be able to surpass her when no one else could?

Her intrigue was unending. She wanted them to grow up fast and show her a strength that was different from her own.

And—she wanted to fight. She yearned for it. Not to one-sidedly exercise violence, but to fight in a duel where both sides contested with all they had.

The duelist called Mirka Stein longed for such a battle more than anyone else in the city.

She whispered an aimless wish to the blue sky. “Won't the world hurry up and become one that can entertain me?”





A week had passed since the riot Yuri raised. City management officially announced that Navie Ionesca and the twelve closest to him were sentenced to exile.

Yuri, Athena, and Fram were given a three-day house arrest and a harsh reprimand, while Haring's case was properly dismissed and he was released without issue.

And—

“Alright! Let's start Mr. Haring's welcoming party into Team Eniastar!”

The members had all gathered around a table on the terrace of Café Argent.

“So anyway, it's a pleasure to work with you!”

“Yeah, I don't really mind that part, but...”

Haring was already starting to feel tired, his head propped up by his hand as he stared fixedly at Yuri.

“Fox, spirit, are you always like that?”

“Mn? This is the norm for us,” Athena immediately replied.

“Yes, these are normal operating conditions,” Fram added.

They had set up camp around Yuri, stuck fast to his side.

“I mean, these days, Yuri's only paying attention to Haring, Haring, Haring! As his Big Sis, I have the right to hug him as much as I want!”

“It's an obligation by this point. An obligation imposed upon us of admiring Yuri up close.”

“...Oi, Yuri, ain't it hard to breathe like that?”

“I kinda got used to it by now!”

“You're pretty adaptable, ain't you.”

Too enervated to say any more on the matter, Haring painstakingly began stuffing his cheeks with food.

“Well, I’m on the team, so I’ll do my work. I know better than to stick my mouth where it don’t belong.”

“Yeah, you’d better not! A croissant isn’t going to get in the way of sisterly love!”

“Hey, you know those delicious-looking horns on your head? Have you ever tried taking them off and eating them? I’m talking about emergency situations, of course. But what do they taste like?”

“Aight then, dueling it is. We’re gonna have to lay some ground rules here...!”

“Oh, a duel!? Then count me in!” Yuri exclaimed.

“You ain’t even a part of this, butt out!”

As they began getting worked up and making a ruckus, Elias quietly stepped out from the back of the shop.

“Quiet. You’re bothering the other customers.”

“Ah... I’m sorry, Mr. Elias,” Yuri apologetically replied.

“Also, if you’re going to duel, wait a bit. A duel between you guys will definitely attract some customers,” Elias added.

“You’re all up for using us, aren’t you!” quipped Yuri.

“Just like you keep using my store. Hey you, Haring, was it? You seem comparatively decent, so if these kids start making a ruckus, please stop them.”

“You’re seriously the only person to call me decent upon meetin’ me for the first time...”

Feeling satisfied after complaining to them, Elias returned to his job. They couldn’t quite raise another uproar after that, so they kept their voices just a bit more subdued.

“Anyway, we have a new member now! That’s one step closer to making it through the Babel Roulette!”

“Well, he may be Haring, but he’s definitely strong!”

“And having Haring will strengthen our front line. We can finally implement some real tactics.”

“Tactics? What’re you talkin’ about? There’s plenty of stuff you coulda done, just the three of you.” Haring doubtfully tilted his head. “That firefox has her white flames, so instead of just bein’ a vanguard, she can also act as a diversion and disrupt enemy lines. The ice spirit can just stay in the back if she wants, but if you start by showin’ off her high firepower, you can use her as a decoy after that. After doing some work on the front line, Yuri’s the sorta fighter who can help out whatever part of the battlefield’s at a standstill.”

Haring chewed on his food, arbitrarily spinning his fork around as he explained.

After they heard his piece, the three of them gathered their faces to the side.

“E-Eh? Wasn’t Haring an idiot like us?”

“He just said something surprisingly decent.”

“That’s why I told you. Unlike what his face suggests, Mr. Haring is good at using his head.”

“I can still hear you, you know. If you’re gonna lower your voices, at least insult me or somethin’.”

Haring took a disgruntled bite of meat before going on.

“Anyway, the point is, there are plenty of plans we can write up as we are now. If possible, I’d like one more person, but you can still recruit members after the preparation period, so that can wait. What we need to do now is see how well our team can operate.”

“Oh, in that case I do have a lead—”

Before Yuri could say any more, Eleanor dropped in from who-knows-where with, “Yuri! Sorry keep you waiting!” and hugged him with her greeting.

“Was worried when heard about incident, but glad to see doing well!”

“Whoa there... Yes, I should thank you for the blood paste!”

“Was useful? Very good!!”

Eleanor seemed bursting with joy as she took Yuri’s hands in celebration. This promptly caused the silverware to fall from Athena and Fram’s hands with a

clang.

“Yuri...brought a new woman...!?”

“It seems we weren’t enough for him...”

“Wait, what are you two talking about!?” Sensing restlessness in the air, Yuri inadvertently took a step back. “I told you two about her, didn’t I!? The elf I met in the dungeon, who looked up to Human Tribe ninjas so much she became a duelist!”

“So in short, a blonde-stacked-loli-ninja-elf,” Fram snapped back.

“Please don’t make her sound like a walking mass of buzzwords...!”

“Aah, for crying out loud! You can’t stick to Yuri too much! Big Sis doesn’t permit it!”

“Really, really!? But Yuri adorable good friend!”

Athena and Eleanor seemed to be exactly on the same wavelength, the former menacingly waving her bushy tail around, while the latter took on a bizarre, intimidating pose.

There was a reason he had called Eleanor here. She had contributed in the matter with Navie, and he did want to thank her for that...but he also wanted her to mediate a certain something else.

“That’s right, Ms. Eleanor! Did you ask your leader?”

“Of course, perfect! Called him here!”

“Eh? What’s this about?” Athena tilted her head.

“I asked if we could have a duel with Ms. Eleanor’s team before the Roulette began. Rate won’t change right now, so we can fight to our heart’s content.”

With all that happened, they had used up quite a bit of their time, and Yuri determined that the most efficient way to grow experienced as a team would be real combat.

“On top of testing our coordination, I thought we could see how other teams move and use it as reference!”

“Sounds good to me. No matter who we’re up against, right now any

experience is good experience,” Haring agreed.

All of a sudden, Eleanor turned to the road. “Ah, there you are! Tenebre! Here, here!” She flailed her hand around at the small young boy walking in their direction.

Upon noticing her, the boy jogged up.

“Oh, Tenebre! So slow!”

“Hm. It’s not me, you’re just too fast, or rather, too impatient... Whatever the case, please stop suddenly jumping along the rooftops. I lose sight of you if I rest even a second.”

His dark purple hair swaying, the boy let out a tired sigh. Judging by his hair color and build, he was presumably a spirit.

“Hah... Hm. So you’re Yuri Eniastar. I’ve heard the rumors.”

“Yes! And you’re, umm, err...”

“Hm, Tenebre les Nuits. I’m the leader of team Nebra-Disk,” he said in a polite tone and held out his hand.

Yuri lightly lowered his head and gripped the hand back.

“I’m thankful for your request,” Tenebre went on. “Even if we are still in the entry period, you don’t get many opportunities to hold a proper team duel. It will be a good lesson.”

“That should be my line; thank you so much for accepting! I just hope we can both be a good learning experience for each other.”

Seeing Yuri’s friendly reception, Tenebre found himself led into a smile. “You’re as good of a kid as Eleanor said. How very promising.”

“Fufu, only natural! Yuri good person I recognize!” Eleanor proudly puffed out your chest.

“And, of course, it isn’t only you, Yuri. When I heard you had such famed fighters as the Flame Deva and Ice Jailer on your side, my personal interest was piqued.”

“Ah, by the way, we got another member too!”

“Hmm, hmm, how rude of me. I’ll watch out for your dragon as well.” Tenebre looked at Haring and calmly nodded. “Incidentally—ice spirit, why do you keep your head turned away?”

Hearing that, Yuri also turned to look at Fram. He saw her there, silent, turned away, with a nebulous look on her face.

“A-hm. It appears you didn’t hear me—” Looking at Fram, Tenebre spoke out a certain name. “—Grace Aizberg. I’m talking to you.”

For a moment, Yuri didn’t understand what it was he had said.

“U-Umm... Her name is Fram.”

“Hmm. Is that what she’s calling herself here? Back when we were in the same village, I distinctly remember she had the name Grace,” Tenebre said with conviction, before offering another correction. “And Fram Aizberg is the name of a spirit no longer of this world.”



Afterword

Let me start by apologizing.

In the afterword to volume one, I believe I said something along the lines of “writing some flirty, fun scenarios with our heroines.”

But then, one day, I heard the voice of God in my head. It spoke to me. It said, “Yuri needs...the sort of guy he can call a big brother!”

Meaning, yes, what I’m trying to say is, it’s not my fault.

With this and that, this is Washiro Fujiki. All sorts of things happened, and volume two became the Haring Volume. His scenario was intended from the start, but I thought, “A shota who hangs around his aniki is good too,” and as a result, I shoved it full force into volume two.

To those of you who thought, “Hey, what’s this crackpot thinking? Forget about the guys, we need some cute girls, right!?” please rest at ease. I introduced a new character specifically for you. I mean just look at her, an air-headed-stacked-loli-ninja-elf. She ordered so many attributes she’s going to cause a traffic jam.

I’m writing about ninjas in another work, and the character Eleanor was pretty much the springboard for that. Or rather, it’s all because of my friend spewing out an indecipherable stream of nonsense words: “stacked-loli-elf-ninja-village.”

Ah, before I’m misconstrued, let me say that I love flat-chested elves as well. Indeed, I feel limitless possibilities from elves. Pure-loli elves and big sister elves, I would love to throw in all sorts, but—at this rate, my fetishes will all be out in the open, so I’m just going to move on.

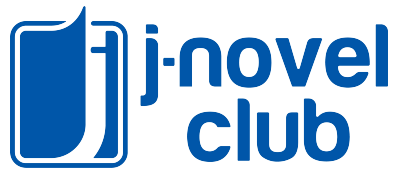
To my editor. I caused you all sorts of trouble in volume one, but I think I was exceedingly proficient this time around, so please praise me. I pride myself on being a person who grows with praise.

To my illustrator, Kodama Yu. When I received the illustration of that angel, I

got all hyped because it perfectly matched what I had in mind. Truly, thank you.

And my greatest thanks to everyone who took part in this publication, and to you, my dear reader!

Washiro Fujiki



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by Washiro Fujiki

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